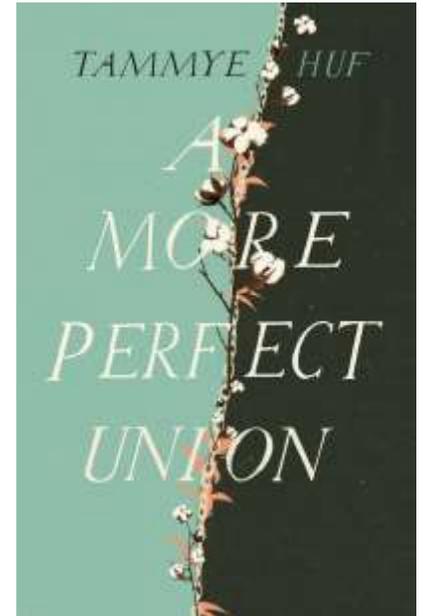


A More Perfect Union by Tammye Huf – Discussion Guide

When Henry O'Toole escapes the Irish famine and sails to America, he doesn't expect the anti-Irish prejudices that await him. Determined never to starve again, he changes his name to Henry Taylor to secure a job and safeguard his future. Traveling south to Virginia, he meets Sarah, a slave woman torn from her family and sold to another plantation. There she must navigate the power system of the white masters, as well as the hierarchy of her fellow slaves.

Even though Henry's white skin represents the oppression Sarah suffers under, and even though having Sarah at his side would force Henry to abandon his hopes of prosperity, their attraction is undeniable and they fall in love. But in 1849 on a Virginian plantation, inter-racial marriage is not only illegal but considered to be an ungodly abomination. No matter how much they want to be together, Sarah is trapped on Jubilee Plantation, owned by another man. This is a love story of epic proportions – a forbidden relationship that has been forged in secrecy, and faces betrayal and jeopardy at every turn.



Questions – SPOILERS INCLUDED

- 1) The title, *A More Perfect Union*, is taken from the first line of the US constitution, 'We the people, in order to form a more perfect union,' and is intended to have more than one meaning. What do you think the title is referring to and do you think it is appropriate for the book?
- 2) Both Henry and the overseer are attracted to Sarah when they see her, but Henry sees her humanity while the overseer sees her as an object. How has Henry's background contributed to the way he sees Sarah and the other enslaved people at Jubilee? How has his background blinded him to her full reality as a slave?
- 3) Initially Henry feels justified in making the chains and feels Sarah's response an overreaction. He comes to understand that although his involvement in the institution of slavery by making chains is very small, he is complicit. Simply loving Sarah does not change his mind. What does?
- 4) In some ways, Matthew Johnson and Henry are parallel characters. Both consider themselves to be good, decent men, though both have engaged in questionable actions for the sake of economic gain. Matthew Johnson enslaves people for profit; Henry helped destroy a widow's home, stole clothes from a dying man, and fled New York with the murdered blacksmith's forge and horses. And yet they are also very different. How would you compare the morality of the two characters?

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- 5) Sarah explains to Henry the particular emotional difficulty of reconciling the attachment you have to a child you helped raise with the fact that this same child will grow to own you as property and have dominion over your life. (Chapter 36) To what extent do you see this conflict played out in Bessie and in Maple? To what extent do Miss Martha and Master also have a conflicted relationship to the enslaved women who raised them?
- 6) Ennis intends to make his fortune by using Hiram Young's race against him and taking his white customers. Henry condemns the plan. Do you think Henry would have joined the scheme if it had been put to him while he was still working as a blacksmith in New York?

(Historical note of interest: Hiram Young was a real person. A former slave, he became wealthy making wagons in Independence, Missouri in the 1850s.)

- 7) When Miss Martha allows the second overseer, Mister Laramie, to address Maple as ma'am, do you think she knows the danger she is putting Maple in for her amusement and simply does not care, or do you think that being removed from the dangers of being an enslaved woman, she hasn't considered the potential consequences of her actions?
- 8) Sarah and Henry's relationship is highly unusual for the time. Others in the enslaved community at Jubilee assume it is a transactional relationship (sex for trinkets or favours) and condemn Sarah for it. Why might they think this and what changes their minds?
- 9) When Maple betrays Sarah at the end of the novel, do you think that her actions show a vindictive spitefulness or is what she does an act of self-preservation?
- 10) Matthew Johnson claims that it is morally acceptable to own slaves as long as they are treated in accordance with his own standards of decency. On several occasions he talks about his slaves being 'happy'. What do you think his reaction will be when he finds out that Bessie has taken her life? Do you think he will accept responsibility for contributing to her death? Do you think he will change his views in light of her suicide?



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