

Discussion Questions

***These Ghosts are Family* by Maisy Card**

1. In *These Ghosts Are Family*, two families are created by an unexpected accident when Abel Paisley decides to fake his own death and assume the identity of his friend Stanford Solomon. How do you think the two families would have been different if Abel hadn't faked his death, moved to New York, and started a second family? Would Irene have been protected from her mother's wrath? Would Vera have been protected from the condemnation of her neighbors? Was Abel justified in running away from his life in Jamaica?
2. Describe Abel. How does the captain in England see him, which is the cause for his new life? How do the women in his life see him, his wives and his daughters? How does Vera see him? How does Estelle see him? Are these judgments of him fair?
3. Consider the title of the book. Why do you think the author chose it? Who—or what—do you think are the ghosts that the title refers to?
4. The book flips between life in Jamaica and New York, with a short stint in London. How important is place and that place's history to the experiences of its characters? Why do Irene and Victor move to New York? Why does Debbie decide to visit Jamaica? What binds these places together—the people currently living? Or the painful history that connects the three places?
5. What do the Rastafarians represent in the context of the book? And what does their ideology threaten—especially in regards to women like Vera's mother, who value whiteness and believe that it is “partly a state of mind, part manipulation of the body” (26)?
6. At the beginning of the book, Caren thinks that “perhaps, a life does not belong exclusively to one person” (10). What do you think of this statement, in light of all the lives represented in the novel? Does considering slavery impact your interpretation? And what does it mean in the case of the present-day characters (Abel, Estelle, Irene) distancing themselves from their familial obligations?
7. Abel and Vera's marriage is a key relationship in the book, though their marriage devolves quickly into infighting and infidelity. Abel says that he loves Adele, his second wife, because she did not try to “remake and remold” him as Vera tried to. What are some of the ways that Vera prods Abel into change? What is the result of this prodding? Early on in Vera and Abel's marriage, Vera thinks “she never thought he was the of man to hit a woman, but she's not sure anymore. She never thought she was the kind of woman to cheat on a man. They don't know each other at all” (39). How much do you think a married couple can ever really know each other?

8. While Abel is the patriarch of the two modern families in the book, the early family history is traced through its mothers. Discuss how this shaped the storytelling. What does the book have to say about the role that women play in a family? What brings women in these families together? What drives them apart?

9. Irene works as a home health aide and one of her patients, Betty, is “obsessed with the dead” (85). What do you think of Betty’s desire to commune with the dead and to inhabit past lives? Irene seems to think it’s foolish, but in what ways does her family history affect her life in the present? To what extent do the past events in our lives affect our present?

10. There’s a dramatic scene in the middle of the book, where Debbie decides to destroy the journal of her ancestor, Harold Fowler, in order to drown out his voice in her head. What did you make of Debbie’s decision?

11. Louise grows up thinking that she’s white, and is shocked when she learns that her mother, Florence, was a slave. How does this knowledge change how she sees herself? How does it change how others see her?

12. In the same chapter as above, Peta-Gay says “[Louise] knew little about the world and the deceit that humans are inherently capable of” (214). What are some of the other secrets kept by the Fowler and Paisley families? Why do they lie (or omit the truth)? What effect do these secrets have on the generations that succeed them?

13. When Vincent and Irene are children, the women of the neighborhood perform an exorcism on their mother, Vera. In response, Vera says “You nuh know what free woman look like, so you say is demon” (144). Discuss the things that happen to Vera during this exorcism. How do these echo the traumas undergone by Abel’s ancestors on the plantation at Warm Manor? Are any of the women in Abel’s family truly free? What does it mean to be free under the law versus acting like it? What are the repercussions for women who pursue their freedom in this book?

14. When Abe, Irene’s son, is in the hospital, hoping his sister will emerge from a coma, he recites the names of his ancestors like an incantation. He says “If anything is left of the real Abel Paisley, even a thimbleful of ash, he’ll wear him proudly around his neck as a poultice. He’ll exalt him, like the rest of his ancestors, even if he isn’t worthy” (251). What does Abe mean by “worthy” and how is it valued? How much should we own of our ancestors successes or failures? How do we determine if they’re worthy of our praise or our scorn?

15. Why do you think the novel ends with the story of the three girls who were kidnapped at Vera’s funeral? What are these girls hungry for? How does this fit into the other themes throughout the novel?

(Questions from publisher)

