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ONECITY ONEBOOK

San Francisco Reads

Fall 2007

A Citywide Book Club

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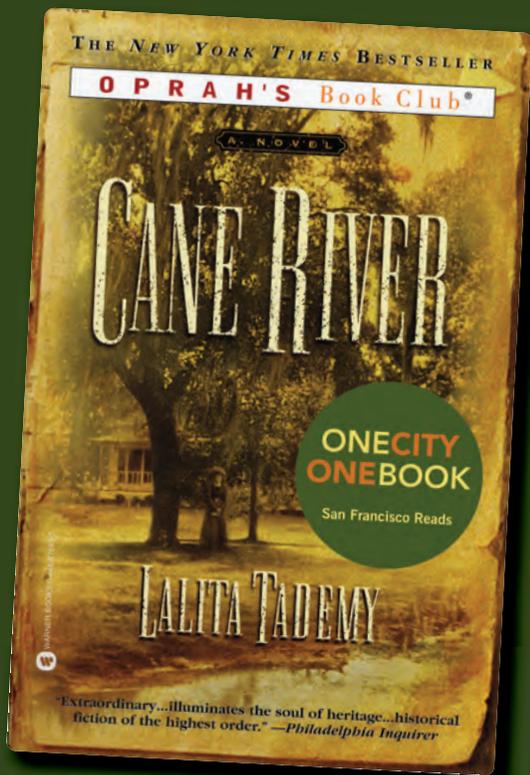


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A message from Mayor Gavin Newsom

Welcome back once again to One City One Book: San Francisco Reads, presented by the San Francisco Public Library. I strongly support our citywide book club because it brings together people of different ages, communities and backgrounds to discuss the ideas raised by one book and to examine how these ideas connect with our daily lives.



I encourage everyone to pick up a copy of *Cane River* by Lalita Tademy so San Francisco can have great discussions, workshops and events this fall. You can find the book at your library or local bookstores. I know that you will discover a terrific story and a fascinating slice of American history within the covers.



A message from City Librarian Luis Herrera

As City Librarian, I invite you to join in One City One Book: San Francisco Reads, our popular citywide book club. One City One Book is intended to engage San Franciscans in conversation and builds on the rich literary tradition of our city.

We are all curious about where we come from and what our family's stories are. Lalita Tademy turned her curiosity and research into a fascinating novel about four women and the lives they lived on Cane River in Louisiana. I think this book will raise important questions about America's past and our own personal histories for all who read it.

We are honored to have Lalita participating in library, bookstore and school events throughout the fall. The Library will also be featuring genealogy workshops, a movie series tie-in and more.

Thank you for participating in One City One Book: San Francisco Reads. I hope you enjoy the experience.

CANE RIVER

About the Book

Lalita Tademy has always been intensely interested in her family's stories, especially ones about her great-grandmother Emily, a formidable figure who died with her life's savings hidden in her mattress. When she began probing deeper for her family's roots, Tademy soon found herself swept up in an obsessive two-year odyssey—and leaving her corporate career for the little Louisiana farming community of Cane River.

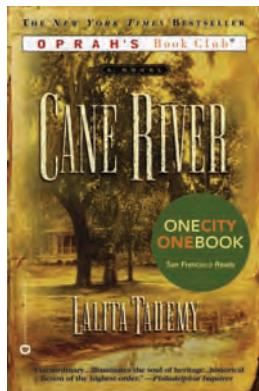
It was here, on a medium-sized Creole plantation owned by a family named Derbanne, that Tademy found her family's roots—and the stories of four astonishing women who battled vast injustices to create a legacy of hope and achievement. They were women whose lives began in slavery, who weathered the Civil War, and who grappled with the contradictions of emancipation through the turbulent early years of the 20th century. Through it all, they fought to unite their family and forge success on their own terms.



Amid small farmhouses and a tightly knit community of French-speaking slaves, free people of color and whites, Tademy's great-great-great-grandmother Elisabeth would bear both a proud heritage and the yoke of slavery. Her youngest daughter, Suzette, would be the first to discover the promise—and heartbreak—of freedom. Suzette's strong-willed daughter Philomene would use determination born of tragedy to reunite her family and gain unheard-of economic independence. And Emily, Philomene's spirited daughter, would fight to secure her children's just due and preserve their future against dangerous odds.

In *Cane River*, an accessible novel that combines painstaking historical reconstruction with unforgettable storytelling, Lalita Tademy presents an all-too-rarely seen part of American history, complete with a provocative portrayal of the complex, unspoken bonds between slaves and slave owners. Most of all, she gives us the saga of real, flesh-and-blood women making hard choices in the face of unimaginable loss, securing their identity and independence in order to face any obstacle, and inspiring all the generations to come.

Cane River is available at the Library in the following formats: paperback, large print, audio CD, audio cassette, Chinese language and Spanish language.



About the Author



Lalita Tademy was born in Berkeley, Calif., far from her parents' southern roots. Nonetheless, her parents made sure their household (Louisiana West) maintained a definite non-California edge, including a steady supply of grits, gumbo, cornbread and collard greens, and a stream of other transplanted Southerners eager to share their "back-home" stories.

Capricorn by birth and temperament, Tademy decided early that independence and self-sufficiency trumped personal amusement, and set out with dogged determination and methodical resolve to fashion a career. She climbed the corporate ladder rung by rung, entering the high technology business world when computers were as big as Volkswagens and managed by highly specialized experts in refrigerated vaults. By the time she left her position as vice president and general manager at a Fortune 500 high tech company in Silicon Valley 20 years later, ending that particular chapter of her life, all she had to do was pack up her laptop and run for the nearest exit.

The transition from focused, driven corporate executive to balanced, fully satisfied, fully realized human being (okay, she hasn't really made it there yet) was an incredible journey of self discovery and growth, only impeded by the fact that there was absolutely no money coming in. But her obsession with finding each root, each branch, stripping the bark and turning over every hidden leaf and stem of her family tree consumed her, until she had accumulated such powerful stories there was no choice but to write about the amazing people with whom she had made acquaintance.

And so, with more than 1,000 documents in hand, she wrote a novel based on the lives of four generations of Creole slave women in Louisiana, women from whom she descended. *Cane River* is a testament to the strength of those who came before, a blend of fact and fiction, homage—and a good, fast, exciting read.

After everything she learned researching and writing *Cane River*, Tademy thought writing her second book would be much less difficult. She was wrong. Maybe if not for the time-intensive process of falling in love and getting married, it would have been, but she will never know. It was almost six years between the publication of *Cane River* and *Red River's* debut in January 2007.

Meanwhile, she looks forward to the succeeding chapters of her own life, eager to know what comes next.



ONE CITY

Special Author Event

Lalita Tademy in conversation with Scott Shafer
Tuesday, Oct. 23
6 p.m.

Join us for a special evening featuring an in-depth conversation between Lalita Tademy and Scott Shafer, host and correspondent of KQED's *The California Report*. Book signing to follow.
Koret Auditorium, Main Library, Lower Level
100 Larkin St. (at Grove) (415) 557-4277

Schedule of Events

One City One Book Discussions

Talk about *Cane River* with other readers!

Tuesday, Sept. 25
7 p.m.
Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk
Branch Library
1 José Sarria Court
(16th Street near Market)
(415) 355-5616

Wednesday, Sept. 26
7 p.m.
Excelsior Branch Library's
Arts and Culture Salon
Discussion and viewing
of a related movie
4400 Mission St.
(at Cotter)
(415) 355-2868

Thursday, Oct. 4
7 p.m.
Books Inc. in the Castro
2275 Market St.
(415) 864-6777

Tuesday, Oct. 9
7:30 p.m.
Jewish Community
Center of San Francisco
3200 California St.
(415) 292-1200

Thursday, Oct. 18
6 p.m.
Books Inc. in the Marina
2251 Chestnut St.
(415) 931-3633

Thursday, Oct. 25
6 p.m.
Books Inc.
in Laurel Village
3515 California St.
(415) 221-3666



ONE BOOK

Author Events

Experience *Cane River* with the author
at these venues around San Francisco.

Wednesday, Sept. 12
12:30 p.m.
Lalita Tademy at
Stacey's Bookstore
581 Market St.
(415) 421-4687

Saturday, Sept. 22
1:30 p.m.
Lalita Tademy at Ocean
View Branch Library
345 Randolph St.
(415) 355-5615

Saturday, Oct. 13
Evening
Litquake Lit Crawl
event with
Lalita Tademy
Mission District
www.litquake.org for details

Sunday, Oct. 14
2 p.m.

Lalita Tademy
at Book Passage
Ferry Building
1 Ferry Building
(415) 835-1020

Saturday, Oct. 27
2 p.m.

Lalita Tademy
at Mission Bay
Branch Library
960 Fourth St. (at Berry)
(415) 355-2838

Sunday, Oct. 28
4 p.m.
Lalita Tademy
at Barnes & Noble
2550 Taylor St.
(415) 292-6762

Thursday, Nov. 1
7 p.m.
Lalita Tademy at Books Inc.
Opera Plaza
601 Van Ness Ave.
(415) 776-1111



One City Four Films

Four engaging and important movies about women's struggles and triumphs throughout different periods of American history

In the Koret Auditorium at the Main Library
Thursdays at 12 p.m.

Oct. 4 *The Color Purple*
Oct. 11 *The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio*
Oct. 18 *What's Love Got to Do with It*
Oct. 25 *North Country*

(When possible, films are shown with captions when possible to assist our deaf and hard of hearing patrons.)

Book Group Therapy

How to start, join, run or fix a book discussion group

Wednesday, Sept. 12

Thursday, Oct. 11

Co-sponsored by Litquake!

6-7:30 p.m.

Main Library Lower Level

Latino/Hispanic Community Room B



Whether you are starting a book group from scratch or want to improve the one that you are in, this workshop will help you with book selection, group dynamics, discussion topics, author events and, of course, snacks. Each class member will receive a customized folder filled with reading lists and print and online resources—and you'll learn about bookstores and libraries in the Bay Area that can enhance your book group experience.

You'll also have the opportunity to share specific book group challenges and issues with the lecturer—and with each other. Our session leader is librarian and book group leader Lauren John, who has led book discussions in libraries, living rooms, bookstores and community centers—as well as in cyberspace. Lauren is the author of *Running Book Discussion Groups: A How To Do It Manual* (Neal-Schuman 2006.) Lauren is also an “Instant Book Group” leader for Book Group Expo (www.bookgroupexpo.com).

Genealogy Workshops

Learn about resources available at your Library.

Research Your Roots!

Wednesday, Sept. 12, 12-1 p.m.

Wednesday, Nov. 14, 6-7 p.m.

Main Library

Fifth Floor Computer Training Center

Learn how to research your family history using two genealogy databases, Heritage-Quest Online and Ancestry Library Edition. Each database complements the other by combining thousands of digital, searchable historical census records, key genealogy resources and local history collections.

Genealogy Resources at the Main

Wednesday, Oct. 17, 12-1 p.m.

Main Library

Fifth Floor Computer Training Center

A brief introduction to genealogical research and a demonstration of the Library's genealogical databases will be followed by a short demonstration of print and microfilm resources in the Magazines & Newspapers Department.

Resources for Researching Your Family History

We have many books available about researching and preserving your family history.



Here are just a few:

Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History · Katherine Scott Sturdevant

Digitizing Your Family History: Easy Methods for Preserving Your Heirloom Documents, Photos, Home Movies and More in A Digital Format · Rhonda R. McClure

Genealogy for the First Time: Research Your Family History · Laura Best

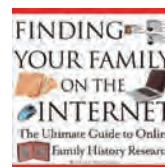
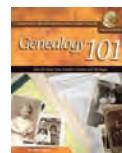
Genealogy 101: How to Trace Your Family's History and Heritage · Barbara Renick

Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity · Dee Parmer Woodtor

Finding Oprah's Roots: Finding Your Own · Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Finding Your Family on the Internet: The Ultimate Guide to Online Family History Research · Michael Otterson

The Organized Family Historian: How to File, Manage, and Protect Your Genealogical Research and Heirlooms · Ann Carter Fleming

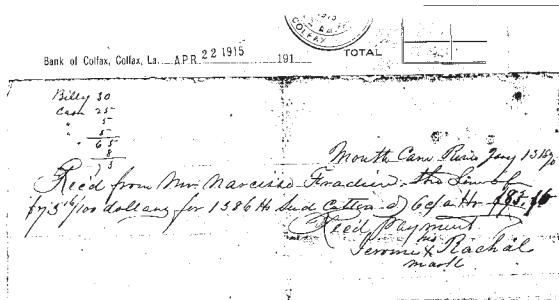


AUTHOR

Q&A with Lalita Tademy

What tools did you use to research your family history?

I began with the census, which is a 10-year snapshot. The problem was that 1870 was the first year that African Americans were considered citizens. Before that, they did not show up on the census. Sometimes they showed up on an auxiliary (list) to the census and not necessarily by name, but just by plantation record, which said a certain plantation had seven slaves—three males, four females. So I went back to Louisiana and searched court records. I looked for land deeds. In many cases, the names of the fathers of the subsequent children would show up. I would track what they were doing, where they lived and what property they owned in order to find out about my family, which was often a side family. Back then, many of the (white) men who owned land had a white family and a black family.



In the early '90s, I hired a professional genealogist. A lot of the records were in Creole French. I had to hire not only a specialist who understood genealogy, but someone who was very familiar with the Cane River area and knew the families and the intersections of the families and could recognize that in private records. It took 18 months to find the 1850 bill of sale of my great-great-great-great-grandmother and three generations of women.

I also did some research online, but at the time I was doing my research, it was before a lot of these records were on the Internet. I spent a lot of time at the National Archives in San Bruno.

What was the most challenging part about writing *Cane River*?

I had never written so much as a short story before. I was full of insecurity about whether I could deliver this story. I knew that I had hold of an incredibly powerful story. I just didn't know whether I was up to the task of telling it. So, everyday I felt a tremendous responsibility and burden to teach myself to write in time to deliver the story. I must have written about 14 drafts, but I had to keep rewriting and rewriting.

INTERVIEW

What kept you going?

I felt one of the characters looking over my shoulder—it was my great-great-grandmother (Philomene). When I was discouraged or tempted to stop or thought that this was too hard or told myself that no one wants to read this, she was the one to keep me going. I was afraid of her. Even though I never met her, I felt her presence in a big way and I felt that it was my responsibility to tell this story.

She was the strong force. I could see that in the records that I uncovered. She was the one that got the land that allowed the family to come back together again. She was an amazingly strong-willed person with real determination. That's what I felt and that's what kept me telling the story.



What does it mean to you that *Cane River* was selected as this year's One City One Book selection?

I cannot tell you how flattered I am by this. It was a wonderful surprise. To be selected by my hometown is huge to me.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

I wanted to put history in a different context. I wanted to deliver it from a different point of view. I wanted to show the strength of women, specifically, and of family in general. I wanted to show what resilience and sacrifice can do for generations.

What I tried very hard to do was to write a book that you could enjoy on any level you chose. If you want a page-turner, that's what I wanted to give you. If you want to get a sense of American history during this time period—slavery, Civil War, Jim Crow South, pre-Civil Rights—then great, I hope you get that. If you can go for deeper themes, then that's great, too. A reader is going to take from it what they want.

ONE CITY

One City One Book Discussion Questions



1. Philomene says that to be a slave was “to have nothing but still have something left to lose.” Discuss the profound but different losses suffered by each generation of women.
2. The relationships between Suzette, Philomene and Emily and the white fathers of their children range from flat-out rape to calculated financial arrangements cemented by childbearing to real—if forbidden and dangerous—love. What did you find most surprising about these often complex relationships?
3. *Cane River* dramatizes the roots of turmoil within America’s black community on issues of skin color. Emily, for example, is described by the author as being “color-struck.” In what ways does color-consciousness continue to afflict black and mixed-race societies today? How, in *Cane River*, was the color-struck attitude a help or hindrance in successive generations’ rising fortunes?
4. During the course of researching *Cane River*, as she kept unearthing tender relationships in unexpected situations, author Lalita Tademy found herself frequently being forced to rethink some long-held beliefs about slavery. What, if anything, surprised you most about the relationships described in the book? In which ways did you find Tademy’s depictions believable? Upsetting? Eye-opening?
5. *Cane River* was a community made up of French planters, slaves and *gens de couleur libre*, or free people of color who “had accumulated a great deal of land and wealth and were just as likely to be slave owners as their white neighbors.” How do you think the free people of color justified playing a willful role in their kinsmen’s oppression?
6. How—or did—each of the women fight against the oppression of their lives? Do you think there was more that Elisabeth or Suzette in particular could have done?
7. Suzette changed her last name three times. Why was this so significant to her?
8. Sunday dinners were a major event in *Cane River*. What made them so important? Family dinners, in which generations come together on a regular basis, seem to be a dying tradition in this country. What effect do you think this has on families today?
9. Each of the four major women characters in *Cane River* was born a slave, but even so, each made distinct choices regarding how she was going to live her life. What were their choices? What were the other options they might have chosen?

ONE BOOK

10. When Madame slaps Suzette in the cookhouse, Elisabeth doesn’t interfere, nor does she have a heart-to-heart conversation afterward with her daughter about what happened. Why not? Was this realistic?

11. What do you think would have happened to each of the main characters if they had not been so deeply rooted in family?

12. Emily, in the very last scene in the book, takes a seat in the front row of the bus to return home from her trip to town. Is this something you believe she would do? Why or why not?

13. Elisabeth, Suzette and Philomene don’t talk about slavery with Emily, who was too young to remember slave life. In fact, they don’t talk much about those times with one another. How does this avoidance shape them and affect the younger generation?



14. Emily’s daughters Mary and Josephine never marry, and her son T.O. married a woman radically different than his mother. What do you think this says about the long-reaching effects of Emily’s choices and behavior as a mother?

15. The author of *Cane River* made the decision to turn her family’s story into a work of fiction rather than nonfiction. What do you think motivated her to do so, and do you think it was the right decision?

(Questions courtesy of Hachette Book Group USA)



Acknowledgments

If you liked *Cane River*, check out:



Beloved · Toni Morrison



The Bondwoman's Narrative · Hannah Crafts

The Color Purple · Alice Walker

Copper Sun · Sharon Draper

In the Fall · Jeffrey Lent

The Known World · Edward P. Jones

A Long Way from Home · Connie Briscoe

Property · Valerie Martin



Sapphire's Grave · Hilda Gurley-Highgate

Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo · Ntozake Shange

The Secret Life of Bees · Sue Monk Kidd

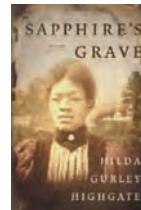
Soulcatcher · Michael White

Their Eyes Were Watching God · Zora Neale Hurston

The Untelling · Tayari Jones

The Wake of the Wind · J. California Cooper

The Women of Brewster Place · Gloria Naylor



All books are available at San Francisco Public Library.

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Photo courtesy of Lalita Tademy

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