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## **The Known World** by Edward P. Jones

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

### **1. What is the “known world” in this book? What known worlds do the characters in *The Known World* inhabit?**

The “known world” is specifically mentioned in connection with Sheriff Skiffington’s map, a three-hundred-year-old depiction of the world as it was known at the time of its engraving. The large map entitled “The Known World,” which Skiffington’s wife finds too ugly to be hung in her house, is distorted, showing the American continents smaller than their actual size and labeling only South America as “America;” North America is left “nameless” (p. 174). This old, yellowed, cramped vision of the world can be seen in contrast to Alice Night’s exuberantly colored and detailed depictions of Manchester County and of the Townsend plantation at the end of the book (pp. 383-6). Alice’s “Creation,” as Calvin calls it, is as detailed and as loving as God’s vision of His Creation, perhaps emanating from the angels to whom she directs her rambling when she is the mad slave on the Townsend plantation. Alice’s world, though physically smaller than that shared by the German woodcutter and John Skiffington, is emotionally and spiritually larger. John turns down the offer of a newer, more accurate map; Alice remaps her tiny world as an artwork of stunning transformative power. It seems, though, that this vision is only available to Alice after she leaves Manchester County, matching physical freedom to her evident freedom of spirit.

Alice’s map is also tied to a particular sense of a specific place. The artworks she produces are highly individual, but their loving detail is instantly recognizable to those who know the place she depicts. That place -- Manchester County -- is the extent of the known world for most of the characters in this book. It is a world ordered by a rigid caste system with narrowly defined roles, even as to who may be invited to dine with whom; chapter five opens with a paragraph on whom John Skiffington visits and who might be expected to share a meal with John and his wife in a particular context. Slaves, free blacks, slave owners, poor whites, and Indians each have parts to play in the life of the community. Those who leave their places -- their own, particular known worlds -- must leave Manchester County, or die. Moses’s known world, for instance, is very small and intimately tied to the physical boundaries of the Townsend plantation. He has so completely identified with the land he works that he can gauge the readiness of the soil by its taste. He is, in fact, so tied to his place on the Townsend plantation that he has no sense of the world beyond; he is, in the words of another slave “world-stupid,” lost once he leaves the plantation. In hobbling him, leaving him crippled for the remainder of his life, the slave patrollers effectively imprison him -- the purpose of hobbling was to insure the slave could not escape by making him unable to run -- but Moses’s inability to imagine a wider world has already ensured his confinement. The patroller Barnum Kinsey, ineffectually moral, haunted by his inability to prevent Augustus’s abduction and unable to shed his fear of being labeled a “nigger kisser,” leaves the county, finally, for Missouri.

This is, of course, a system and a place on the brink of extinction. The accelerating pace of escaping slaves and the circulating rumors of murder, revolt, and miscegenation mark the deterioration of the structures that keep people in their places. Robbins, Clara Martin, and other slave owners sense this; their fears of slave revolt, of being murdered in their beds by their servants, and of being cheated by slave traders and abolitionists both, are the result of their insecurity about the state of slavery as an institution. Manchester County itself will disappear within sixty years of the events in this book, first depopulated and then absorbed by surrounding counties. The



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“known world” depicted in John’s map has expanded since the map was made, its boundaries pushed outward by exploration; the known world of Manchester County will collapse and the county will be erased from the map. Ironically, it is the slaves who, once emancipated, escape that world to map their own worlds in Richmond, in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

The title may also be seen as an ironic comment on the pervasiveness of a particular image of slavery in our culture. The antebellum South may feel like a known world, enough so that Jones could write his novel with almost no research, but this corner of it is all but lost to history.

### **2. The Known World is ostensibly about the life of Henry Townsend. How well do we know Henry Townsend at the end of the novel? Does the novel encourage any judgments about him?**

Though Henry is the focus around which the novel comes together, in some ways, we don’t know him very well at all by the end of the novel. His life story is told in detail in the first few chapters of the book, but Henry’s biography forms only part of just three of the twelve chapters that make up the novel. We are given very few cues to his emotional life, or to the forces that impel him to act in the way he does. Caldonia Townsend, William Robbins, John Skiffington, Moses, and even Maude have fuller inner lives. Rather, the novel shows the way people react to Henry. For instance, William Robbins’s emotional landscape becomes clear in his fears for the young Henry Townsend, and in his realization, in the aftermath of the ill-fated flight of Philomena, his black mistress, to Richmond, “that the world would not be very good to the children he had had with Philomena, but whatever world it would be, he wanted Henry in it for them” (p. 121).

If the book offers any judgment of Henry, it seems most of all to convict him of a certain naivety and a lack of development. “Henry never lived to be completely handsome,” Fern tells the writer who comes to her years later looking for information about Henry Townsend for a pamphlet he is working up about the peculiarities of Southern culture. “Augustus did, but his son fell short” (p. 128). Fern, who was Henry’s teacher and later his friend, and who owned slaves herself, refers to a certain comfort with oneself, a kind of fearlessness that Henry never achieves, but Henry is ignorant in other ways as well, particularly in the implications of his decision to own slaves. Augustus and Robbins each see different aspects of that ignorance. Augustus sees it in Henry’s puzzlement over his father’s rage and in Henry’s assertion that because he is free, he has the same rights as white men. Robbins sees it in Henry’s wrestling with Moses as though they were peers, signaling Henry’s inability to separate himself from his property. Robbins understands, as Henry does not, that there must be a hard line between a man and his property or slavery cannot stand. Henry’s failure to see that is, for Robbins, Henry’s fatal flaw; it is the sight of Henry “tussling” with Moses that sends Robbins to Fern to ask that Henry be educated, though he is well past the age at which Fern usually accepts students.

Henry’s promise to Caldonia that he will be a “good master” is also revealed to be hopelessly naive. Robbins has told him that owning slaves means never being alone: “Knowing how painful loneliness could be, having been separated as a child from Augustus and then Mildred, Henry had thought that a good thing, never to be alone, to always have someone” (p. 85). But, as Robbins teaches him later, being a master is in fact a lonely proposition, requiring the master to remain separate from his property. To do otherwise is to point “to the line that separates you from your property and [tell] your property that the line does not matter” (p. 123). A good master can be benevolent so long as the slaves cooperate; discipline must be maintained at all costs. And discipline is a lonely undertaking, separating the punisher from the transgressor. Henry fails to see these contradictions, even as he takes his confusion and embarrassment out on Moses and, later, has Elias’s ear notched as punishment for attempting



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to escape, ignoring Caldonia's pleas for leniency.

### **3. What does this book seem to see as the price of slavery? Who pays it and in what currency?**

Slavery is, in this book, a kind of moral quicksand into which even the best-intentioned characters are pulled. The violence of slavery erodes family structures for both slaves and slave owners, distorts relationships, and deadens the emotional engagement on which relationships are usually founded.

The clearest example of this is that of John Skiffington and his wife, Winifred. John's father moved to North Carolina in the belief that God had instructed him to leave Georgia and his place as an overseer, and to renounce slavery. John personally believes that slavery is wrong and has vowed not to own slaves. John's moral stand is compromised, though, by his position as sheriff of Manchester County, sworn to uphold the law of the land, including the laws concerning slavery. As sheriff, it is his job to protect the rights of the slave owners; the slaves, as property, have no rights under the law. William Robbins, ever vigilant in his defense of his own plantation and human property, will not allow Sheriff Skiffington to forget his obligations to the law, either. Thus, one of John's primary responsibilities is to track escaped slaves and return them to slavery.

His wife, Winifred, is from the North, educated by the Quakers, and is also opposed to slavery. She is startled by the wedding gift John's cousin, Counsel, and his wife bring her: a young girl, Minerva, to be her maid. She and John resolve to keep her; they cannot sell her and ensure she is cared for, nor can John send her north to freedom and expect to retain the respect of his constituents. They plan eventually to return to the North, leaving slavery behind, and to take her with them; that move is continually, and tragically, deferred. They raise Minerva as a daughter, or nearly so, but the structures of slavery insidiously pervade the relationship. John struggles with an unfatherly attraction to the nubile Minerva, acknowledging that some men would see no obstacle to taking a young slave girl as a lover. When Winifred and Minerva do move to Philadelphia after John's death, and Minerva disappears one day from the city streets, the distraught Winifred, anxious to get her daughter back, posts a missing poster that echoes the language of lost slave posters from the South. Minerva, reading it, will decide not to return to Winifred, who "means no harm" by her words: "But John Skiffington's widow had been fifteen years in the South, in Manchester County, Virginia, and people down there just talked that way" (p. 382). Winifred's love has also been tainted by her contact, however reluctant, with slavery, and cannot escape the emotional confines of the old South.

The cost of slavery can also be seen in Moses. In his earliest appearance in the story, as the prisoner Jean Broussard sells him to William Robbins, Moses begs tearfully not to be separated from the woman he is with: "Me and Bessie together. She all I have in this world. We is one as a family" (p. 173). He is separated from Bessie, though, when Robbins, sensing in her some incipient disability, refuses to buy her along with Moses. When Moses continues to beg for Bessie to be kept with him, Robbins threatens to shoot him. Moses never again exhibits that kind of dedication to another individual. On the Townsend plantation, he is a neglectful husband and father to Priscilla and Jamie. After Henry's death, as he imagines himself master of the Townsend plantation, he asks himself dispassionately, "Where does a man put a family he does not need?" (p. 293). Caldonia and Priscilla cannot exist in the same world, so Priscilla must go. Contemplating himself as master, he reduces the slave woman with whom he has shared a life and a child to an inconvenience and shuttles her off to the North with Alice.

The book is rife with other examples of the cost slavery exacts in terms of human relationships: Robbins's ability to separate his love for Philomena from his view of other black people as property and his neglect of his wife for the mistress he cannot acknowledge; Clara Martin's inability to trust her one old slave; Maude's willingness to

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poison her husband in order to retain the slaves he plans to free; Barnum Kinsey's impotence before the cruelty of Harvey Travis, his moral impulse neutralized by the threat of being branded a "nigger kisser."

### **4. Why is historical data about Manchester County incorporated into the novel?**

The historical data, all of it fabricated, serves to map more concretely the world in which these characters operate, grounding Jones's story in a concrete, quantifiable reality. In some sense, this effort may seem unnecessary. After all, the world of the antebellum South has been amply documented for readers in works from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* to Alex Haley's *Roots* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. But Jones, working from a concept that must seem fantastic to at least some readers, uses census data, court records, and quotations from histories of Manchester County to bring another aspect of that world we think we know so well to life.

The historical comments also highlight the web of relationships that connect members of this community, placing Henry, for instance, as one of eight slave-owning free black families in the county, all of whom "knew one another's business" (p. 7). Similarly, the way in which this information is presented frequently calls the numbers themselves into question in a way that reinforces the fundamental importance of people and community in this history. The 1860 census total is incorrect, we are told, because the census taker had an argument with his wife and, as a result, neglected to carry a one in his arithmetic (p. 7). The 1840 census taker struggles with whether to designate half-Indian children as white or black, free or slave, and finally resorts to a faith in his government's ability to "read between the lines" of his report; Robbins is carefully designated as the wealthiest man in the county because of the census taker's pride in his distant kinship to the Robbins family (p. 22). These kinds of connections suggest that what is important is not the data itself, but the relationships and communities that produced it.

In some cases, the historical interjections point toward the future. Manchester County, we find out, does not survive Reconstruction; it is the only Virginia county to be absorbed by surrounding jurisdictions. Like the institution of slavery, the county disappears, but the people who lived as slaves survive and accomplish great things -- Stamford and Delphie Crow Blueberry found a home for colored orphans in Richmond; Alice Night finds an artistic outlet for her particular madness; Celeste and Elias's line will come to comprise one-twentieth of Virginia's population.

### **5. How does Moses's story frame the events of the novel?**

Moses embodies a number of issues central to the story, most notably those of place and of the effects of slavery on all who are touched by it. First, Moses is the character who most dramatically attempts to escape the limits of his position within the limited world of Manchester County. Other slaves will escape and whites will leave, but Moses tries to make a different place for himself within the county. After Henry's death, Moses seeks to replace his master, envisioning himself as a free black plantation owner and Caldonia's husband. This vision is defeated by Caldonia's fears, but there is some sense that it would be impossible even if Caldonia could find her way to free Moses. Moses does not have Henry's native intelligence or the education he gained traveling with Robbins. Denied his one dream, Moses tries to escape, walking away from the plantation. Like a number of other characters in the book, though, Moses is so tied to Manchester County, and to the land on which he lives, that he literally cannot leave it. He cannot find his way in a wider world.

The novel opens with Moses's habit of tasting the dirt of the fields and ends with Celeste's concern that he eat each day. In both cases, the act of eating signals Moses's connection to something larger than himself. Moses eats dirt "not only to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the field, but because the eating of it tied him to the



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only thing in his small world that meant almost as much as his own life" (p. 2), namely, the land he works; similarly, Celeste's daily meals signal his inescapable ties to the community of slaves on the plantation. These connections are the forces that shape Moses's "small world," as they shape the lives of the other characters in the book. The two sets of relationships -- with the land and with the people in his life -- do not always coexist easily. Moses's duties as overseer set him apart from the other slaves, and his nightly treks into the forest to "be with himself" estrange him from his wife and child.

As Henry's first slave, Moses is with his master longer than anyone else in the book except William Robbins. Moses and Henry are in some ways mirrors of each other. They are nearly the same age -- Moses is 35 on the night Henry dies at the age of 31 -- and both were born into slavery. Henry has been freed by his father's efforts, but in the early days of his ownership of Moses, Henry seems to treat his slave as a fellow worker, even a brother, seeking his help in the planning of the house, sharing a cabin with him at night, and "tussling" with him in a free moment. It is on Moses that the brunt of Henry's embarrassment falls when Robbins points out to him the inappropriateness of such a relationship. Like Henry, Moses hardens over the course of the story. As Henry discovers that being a "good master" requires a certain emotional distance and a willingness to punish, Moses -- once devoted to a woman from whom he has been separated by Robbins -- distances himself from his wife and child to the point that he can see them as nothing more than an encumbrance to his dreams of a life with Caldonia as a free black man.

### **6. How do Augustus Townsend and William Robbins function as fathers to Henry? Where do they help Henry, and where and how do they fail him?**

While Augustus is Henry's biological father, he is largely absent from Henry's life. He frees Henry, but boy and father seem to have little engagement with each other. As someone else's property, Henry is beyond the reach of Augustus's fatherly impulses. Augustus can attempt to guide, but he can neither discipline nor punish. Henry becomes increasingly distant, forgetting to come to the Sunday visits that mean so much to his parents. When Augustus's frustration breaks into violence -- he yells at Henry and pushes him to the ground when the boy is two hours late for a weekly visit -- Robbins forbids all visits for a month. "It'll take all of a month for him to heal from what you did, Augustus" (p. 20). Robbins's rights as property owner supersede Augustus's rights and responsibilities as father. By the time Augustus manages to free Henry, the boy has grown nearly into a man and Augustus cannot overcome the awkwardness built up in those years apart. He is shocked to find Henry has purchased a slave and, again, his frustration breaks into violence. Beating Henry with one of the walking sticks he carves and sells, he shouts at his son, "Thas how a slave feel! . . . Thas just how every slave every day be feelin" (p. 138). Henry answers violence with violence, snapping the rod with which his father beats him, declaring "Thas how a master feels." Augustus maintains a presence in Henry's life, but refuses to sleep in the house of a slave owner; he and Mildred sleep in a vacant slave cabin on the few occasions they come to visit Henry and Caldonia. In fact, Augustus is much more comfortable with the slaves than with his son. If anything, Augustus represents for Henry his past as a slave; it is a past, as Robbins will teach him, that he must disavow.

Henry denies the past that Augustus cannot forget, asserting for himself the rights of any white man. "I ain't done nothin I ain't a right to. I ain't done nothin no white man wouldn't do," he tells Augustus (p. 138). When Henry leaves Augustus's house for good, he rides to Robbins's house. In turning from Augustus to Robbins, Henry allies himself with the slave owners, taking for his mentor the leader of Manchester County's slave-owning class. Robbins couches his reproof of Augustus in terms of damaged property, but it is clear that Henry has become more than that to him, and he has come to mean something to Henry. Robbins plays a father's role in Henry's life, ensuring the boy is schooled in a trade, apprenticing him to the plantation shoemaker. Henry becomes, like his fa-



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ther before him, a celebrated craftsman whose work is coveted throughout the county, but Henry learns his craft not from his father but at his owner's behest. Similarly, it is necessarily Robbins who educates Henry, teaching him how to be a master, how to behave in this strange new world. Robbins, then, helps Henry to chart a future for himself as a free black in the South, a course away from his roots as a slave.

Both Robbins's and Augustus's visions are limited in their own ways, and Henry cannot escape these limitations. If Henry does not live to see the collapse of his plantation, and eventually of slavery as an institution, Augustus's fate is a powerful reminder that the legacy of slavery cannot be so easily escaped. Similarly, Robbins's view of the world is steeped in the institution of slavery; his primary lesson to Henry is that certain relationships are not allowed, that Henry must learn to deny any connection between himself and "property" he has "a slip of paper on" (p. 123). Neither Robbins nor, ultimately, Henry seems to see the irony of Robbins's relationship with Philomena in this context.

### **7. How are the women's experiences of slavery different from the men's in this book?**

There are no Southern belles in this book. The women in *The Known World* navigate the limitations of their positions as women in the antebellum South in different ways, but few of them escape those limits.

This novel clearly argues that slavery as a social system oppresses all who are touched by it, slave owners as well as slaves, men as well as women. William Robbins, the wealthiest and most powerful man in the county, cannot openly acknowledge his beloved mistress, Philomena; he sees the "storms" in his head (epileptic fits, perhaps?) as the price he pays for his happiness with her. He is driven by paranoia, convinced that abolitionists are invading the county and stealing slaves away, that he is being cheated in every transaction, and that his slaves will slip away from him if he is not vigilant. Counsel Skiffington, John's cousin, is oppressed by the debt he carries in the wake of three bad growing seasons. In fact, that debt brings him to an almost Biblical ruin; it is a creditor, taking advantage of the hospitality Counsel cannot deny him, who brings to the plantation the smallpox that kills everyone, slave and white alike, and destroys the plantation. The fear of slaves escaping or revolting pervades the county, driving John Skiffington to institute slave patrols to control the enslaved black population.

To some extent, women, who are more circumscribed by their gender, are more acutely affected by these circumstances. Robbins's wife, embittered by her inability to win her husband's love, can only strike out at the slaves around her; she is gradually consigned to a single wing of the plantation house. Timorous Clara Martin, living in terror of being murdered by her one old slave, sleeps for years with her door locked and a knife under her pillow. Philomena, Robbins's mistress, is technically freed, but when she takes her children to Richmond, which she has always longed to see, Robbins pursues her just as he would any escaped slave. When she threatens again, years later, to flee to Richmond, Robbins promises he will sell her back into slavery if she does so. To her avowal that he cannot sell her into slavery because she has her "free papers," he replies that, "in a world where people believed in a God they could not see and pretended the wind was his voice, paper meant nothing, that it had only the power that he, Robbins, would give it" (p. 144). The truth of this statement is made chillingly clear in Augustus's fate at the end of the book. Philomena, for her part, does not see Richmond again until after it has been burned by the Union Army.

Women's sexuality is more circumscribed by miscegenation laws than men's. Robbins can carry on an affair with Philomena more or less openly; Dora and Louis are acknowledged as his children by the community. In some ways, the wives of black slave owners are even more circumscribed, as their position in the community is in conflict with their color. They belong, essentially, between two or even three classes. Caldonia, in the midst of her af-

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fair with Moses, is terrified by the story of a white woman, a slave owner's wife, executed for having an affair with a black man. Unsure of her own legal status as a black slave owner, she imagines herself, as a slave owner's wife, in an analogous position. Fern Elston is clearly attracted to Jebediah Dickinson in some obscure way, but it is not an attraction she can act on. Instead, she must send him away. Clara Martin, a white woman, seems as frightened by her own reaction to her slave's touching her as by anything he has done.

Still, women do claim some power for themselves in ways that are fully feminine. If Caldonia is less than successful in assuming her husband's duties as master of the plantation, her mother, Maude, offers a threatening alternative that suggests perhaps the slave owners should be looking not to their slaves, but to their women. She murders her husband when he plans to free the slaves, which would destroy what she calls her "legacy." Her management of the plantation is evidently competent; she has hit on a plan for renting the land and slaves to yield more profit with less of the heavy fieldwork she cannot do. Then, as Caldonia will do after her, she takes up with one of her slaves. But where Caldonia is frightened by the consequences of her sexual liaison, Maude revels in her power in the relationship, gleefully threatening her lover:

"Do you know," Maude had said the first time she and Clarke had lain together, "that if I was a white woman, they would come in here and tear you limb from limb?" "And what they gon do with you being colored?" he asked. Maude, delighted that she had taken such a step in her life, lay back, the sweat over her body still drying. "I suspect that since I own you, since I have the papers on you, they might do the same thing if I up and screamed. They wouldn't be as fast, I suppose, but they would come, Clarke." He said nothing. (p. 246)

If she does not have the power of William Robbins, Maude -- a black, slave-owning woman -- is clearly aspiring to that model.

There are other, less murderous models of feminine power in the book. Fern Elston's education clearly affords her a special standing in the community, even among white men, and her very proper manner is calculated to remind the poor white slave patrollers of that status. Celeste and Alice, as slaves and as women handicapped by evident physical or mental deficits, both find oblique ways to express their power. Celeste resists the incursions of slavery and urges her husband, Elias, to resist as well in ways that push against the system without bringing its full weight down upon them. When Moses disappears, Elias is asked by one of the patrollers to act as overseer and get the slaves back to work. Though Elias once dreamed of escape, his love for Celeste, who is lame, has forced him to give up those dreams and tied him to the plantation. He no longer resists, but instead channels his resentment at Moses; the two men have a longstanding history of antipathy. Elias sees the patroller's request as an opportunity to strike at Moses; he envisions himself replacing the overseer and throwing his success in Moses's face when he returns. Celeste suggests to him a different form of resistance in simple refusal. She tells him not to send the slaves to work for Caldonia. "Don't send them to no fields. Don't send them nowhere. If she want them workin so much, let her come out here and do it herself. . . . Don't do her work for her, Elias. Please, don't do it," she begs him (p. 335). Similarly, Alice's wandering, whether the symptom of a genuine affliction or a canny act, allows her a measure of freedom no other slave enjoys and, eventually, opens the way to escape.

*July, 2004 -This Book Discussion Guide was developed by MaryAnne M. Gobble, who has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a freelance writer living and working in Durham, North Carolina.*

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