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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Ta-Nehisi Coates is a distinguished writer in residence at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. He is the author of the bestselling books *The Beautiful Struggle*, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, and *Between The World And Me*, which won the National Book Award in 2015. His first novel, *The Water Dancer*, was released in September 2019. Ta-Nehisi is a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. He is also the current author of the Marvel comics *The Black Panther* and *Captain America*.

- [Author's website](#)

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Why do you think Coates uses terms like "Tasked" and "Quality" instead of "slaves" and "masters"? What do you think the novel gains from this altered language?
2. Hiram says that the Tasked are "Blessed, for we do not bear the weight of pretending pure." How does Coates define morality in the novel? In what ways does Hiram's notion of morality differ from that of the Quality, or even Corinne?
3. What do you make of Howell Walker's apology? To what extent does Coates humanize Howell? Why do you think he does this?
4. What roles do the concepts of motherhood and fatherhood play in the novel? How does Hiram define family?
5. Sophia tells Hiram, "But what you must get, is that for me to be yours, I must never be yours." What is Coates saying about the particular struggles of black women in this novel? How does Hiram's relationship with Sophia change over time?

6. Characters like Corrine risk their lives to work for the Underground, while also allowing Hiram and some of its other members to come to harm for the greater good of the organization. What might Coates be trying to say about the relationship between white people and racial justice with these characters?
7. Discuss Harriet's role in the story. Did you know immediately who she was? What impact does the inclusion of a historical figure have on the narrative?
8. What is the significance of water throughout the book? Why do you think Coates chooses it as the medium for Hiram's power?
9. Coates is best known for his works of nonfiction; THE WATER DANCER is his first novel. Why do you think he chose to explore the themes of slavery and the Underground Railroad through fiction? What is gained when the book isn't tethered to historical fact? What is lost?
10. What does THE WATER DANCER add to our understanding of how enslaved people suffered? What does the novel add to our understanding of the agency, resilience and strength of enslaved people during that time?
11. How are the themes of THE WATER DANCER relevant to modern discussions of race, privilege and power?

- [https://www.bookcompanion.com/discussion\\_questions\\_the\\_water\\_dancer.html](https://www.bookcompanion.com/discussion_questions_the_water_dancer.html)

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Hiram Walker is the son of an enslaved woman and her slave master, owner of a prominent Virginia estate. When Hiram is nearly killed in a drowning accident, he detects an amazing gift he cannot understand or harness. He travels between worlds, gone but not gone, and sees his mother, Rose, who was sold away when he was a child. Despite this astonishing vision, he cannot remember much about Rose. His power and his memory are major forces that propel Hiram into an adulthood filled with the hypocrisy of slavery, including the requisite playacting that flavors a stew of complex relationships. Struggling with his own longing for freedom, Hiram finds his affiliations tested with Thena, the taciturn old woman who took him in as a child; Sophia, a young woman fighting against her fate on the plantation; and Hiram's father who obliquely acknowledges him as a son. Throughout his courageous journey north and participation in the underground battle for liberation, Hiram struggles to match his gift with his mission. Coates (*We Were Eight Years in Power*, 2017) brings his considerable talent for racial and social analysis to his debut novel, which captures the brutality of slavery and explores the underlying truth that slaveholders could not dehumanize the enslaved without also dehumanizing themselves. Beautifully written, this is a deeply and soulfully imagined look at slavery and human aspirations. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Best-selling MacArthur fellow Coates has an avid following and his turn to fiction will bring in even more readers. -- Vanessa Bush (Reviewed 7/1/2019) (Booklist, vol 115, number 21, p32).

### Publisher's

### Weekly

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Coates (*We Were Eight Years in Power*) makes his ambitious fiction debut with this wonderful novel that follows Hiram Walker, a boy with an extraordinary memory. Born on a Virginia plantation, he realizes at five that he has a photographic recall—except where it concerns his mother, Rose, who was sold and whom he can

only reconstruct through what others tell him. Born to Rose and Howell Walker, master and owner of Lockless, the land Hiram works, Hiram is called up at age 12 to the house to serve Maynard, his half-brother. When the novel opens, Hiram is 19, and he and Maynard are on their way back to Lockless when the bridge they're traveling over collapses. Deep in the river, Hiram is barraged with visions of his ancestors, and finally a woman water-dancing, whom he recognizes as his mother. After he wakes up, mysteriously saved even as Maynard dies, Hiram yearns for a life beyond "the unending night of slavery." But when his plans to escape with Sophia, the woman he loves, are dashed by betrayal and violence, Hiram is inducted into the Underground, the secret network of agents working to liberate slaves. Valued for his literacy and for the magical skill the Underground believes he possesses, Hiram comes to learn that the fight for freedom comes with its own sacrifices and restrictions. In prose that sings and imagination that soars, Coates further cements himself as one of this generation's most important writers, tackling one of America's oldest and darkest periods with grace and inventiveness. This is bold, dazzling, and not to be missed. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/01/2019) (Publishers Weekly, vol 266, issue 26, p).

### Library

### Journal

/\* Starred Review \*/ DEBUT This ambitious fiction debut by social critic Coates (*Between the World and Me*) features a protagonist with what might be called superpowers, not surprising from the man who brought *The Black Panther* back to life. Son of an enslaved African American woman and her owner, Hiram Walker grew up with conditional freedom, charged with being his slow-witted white brother Maynard's handler. The book begins with Maynard's death and focuses mainly on Hiram's efforts to piece together what happened that fateful night and how he himself escaped Maynard's fate. In passages sometimes weighty with philosophizing, Hiram becomes involved with the Virginia Underground Railroad, discovering that he has a skill called conduction that allows him to transport runaway slaves, as well as his loved ones, to safety in the free states. The two vital components of conduction are water and memories, and like most of us, Hiram has some memories he'd rather not revisit. VERDICT Coates cites Toni Morrison and E.L. Doctorow as huge influences in writing this book, and the scope and seriousness on display here would make them both proud. The author can be didactic, unable to escape the weight of his message, but when he allows the action to unfold, the story becomes a work of wonder. Essential for all libraries. [See Prepub Alert, 3/4/19.] --Stephen Schmidt (Reviewed 08/01/2019) (Library Journal, vol 144, issue 7, p85).

### Kirkus

### Reviews

The celebrated author of *Between the World and Me* (2015) and *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017) merges magic, adventure, and antebellum intrigue in his first novel. In pre-Civil War Virginia, people who are white, whatever their degree of refinement, are considered "the Quality" while those who are black, whatever their degree of dignity, are regarded as "the Tasked." Whether such euphemisms for slavery actually existed in the 19th century, they are evocatively deployed in this account of the Underground Railroad and one of its conductors: Hiram Walker, one of the Tasked who's barely out of his teens when he's recruited to help guide escapees from bondage in the South to freedom in the North. "Conduction" has more than one meaning for Hiram. It's also the name for a mysterious force that transports certain gifted individuals from one place to another by way of a blue light that lifts and carries them along or across bodies of water. Hiram knows he has this gift after it saves him from drowning in a carriage mishap that kills his master's oafish son (who's Hiram's biological brother). Whatever the source of this power, it galvanizes Hiram to leave behind not only his chains, but also the two Tasked people he loves most: Thena, a truculent older woman who practically raised him as a surrogate mother, and Sophia, a vivacious young friend from childhood whose attempt to accompany Hiram on his escape is thwarted practically at the start when they're caught and jailed by slave catchers. Hiram directly confronts the most pernicious abuses of

slavery before he is once again conducted away from danger and into sanctuary with the Underground, whose members convey him to the freer, if funkier environs of Philadelphia, where he continues to test his power and prepare to return to Virginia to emancipate the women he left behind—and to confront the mysteries of his past. Coates' imaginative spin on the Underground Railroad's history is as audacious as Colson Whitehead's, if less intensely realized. Coates' narrative flourishes and magic-powered protagonist are reminiscent of his work on Marvel's Black Panther superhero comic book, but even his most melodramatic effects are deepened by historical facts and contemporary urgency. An almost-but-not-quite-great slavery novel. (Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2019).

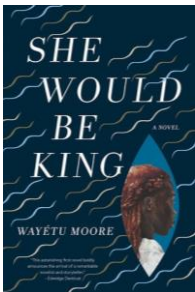
## READALIKES

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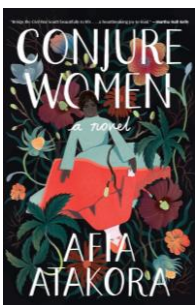
### ***The Deep* by Rivers Solomon**

The historian of the water-dwelling descendants of pregnant African slaves thrown overboard by slavers keeps all the memories of her people both painful and miraculous, until she discovers that their future lies in returning to the past.



### ***She Would Be King* by Wayetu Moore**

Reimagines the dramatic story of Liberia's early years through three unforgettable characters who share an uncommon bond.



### ***Conjure Women* by Afia Atakora**

A midwife and conjurer of curses reflects on her life before and after the Civil War, her relationships with the families she serves and the secrets she has learned about a plantation owner's daughter.