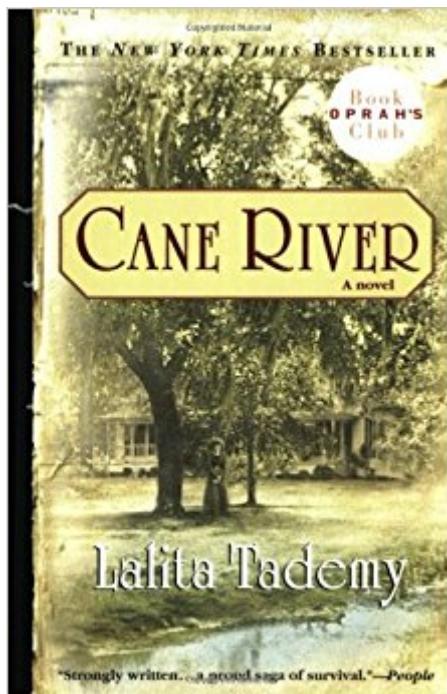


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# Cane River (Oprah's Book Club)



## **Synopsis**

A New York Times bestseller and Oprah's Book Club Pick—the unique and deeply moving saga of four generations of African-American women whose journey from slavery to freedom begins on a Creole plantation in Louisiana. Beginning with her great-great-great-great grandmother, a slave owned by a Creole family, Lalita Tademy chronicles four generations of strong, determined black women as they battle injustice to unite their family and forge success on their own terms. They are women whose lives begin in slavery, who weather the Civil War, and who grapple with contradictions of emancipation, Jim Crow, and the pre-Civil Rights South. As she peels back layers of racial and cultural attitudes, Tademy paints a remarkable picture of rural Louisiana and the resilient spirit of one unforgettable family. There is Elisabeth, who bears both a proud legacy and the yoke of bondage... her youngest daughter, Suzette, who is the first to discover the promise—and heartbreak—of freedom... Suzette's strong-willed daughter Philomene, who uses a determination born of tragedy to reunite her family and gain unheard-of economic independence... and Emily, Philomene's spirited daughter, who fights to secure her children's just due and preserve their dignity and future. Meticulously researched and beautifully written, *Cane River* presents a slice of American history never before seen in such piercing and personal detail.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Lalita Tademy's riveting family saga chronicles four generations of women born into slavery along the Cane River in Louisiana. It is also a tale about the blurring of racial boundaries:

great-grandmother Elisabeth notices an unmistakable "bleaching of the line" as first her daughter Suzette, then her granddaughter Philomene, and finally her great-granddaughter Emily choose (or are forcibly persuaded) to bear the illegitimate offspring of the area's white French planters. In many cases these children are loved by their fathers, and their paternity is widely acknowledged. However, neither state law nor local custom allows them to inherit wealth or property, a fact that gives Cane River much of its narrative drive. The author makes it clear exactly where these prohibitions came from. Plantation society was rigidly hierarchical, after all, particularly on the heels of the Civil War and the economic hardships that came with Reconstruction. The only permissible path upward for hard-working, ambitious African Americans was indirect. A meteoric rise, or too obvious an appearance of prosperity, would be swiftly punished. To enable the slow but steady advance of their clan, the black women of Cane River plot, plead, deceive, and manipulate their way through history, extracting crucial gifts of money and property along the way. In the wake of a visit from the 1880 census taker, the aged Elisabeth reflects on how far they had come. When the census taker looked at them, he saw colored first, asking questions like single or married, trying to introduce shame where there was none. He took what he saw and foolishly put those things down on a list for others to study. Could he even understand the pride in being able to say that Emily could read and write? They could ask whatever they wanted, but what he should have been marking in the book was family, and landholder, and educated, each generation gathering momentum, adding something special to the brew. In her introduction, Tademy explains that as a young woman, she failed to appreciate the love and reverence with which her mother and her four uncles spoke of their lively Grandma 'Tite (short for "Mademoiselle Petite"). She resented her great-grandmother's skin-color biases, which were as much a part of Tademy's memory as were her great-grandmother's trademark dance moves. But the old stories haunted the author, and armed with a couple of pages of history compiled by a distant Louisiana cousin, she began to piece together a genealogy. The result? Tademy eventually left her position as vice president of a Fortune 500 company and set to work on Cane River, in which she has deftly and movingly reconstructed the world of her ancestors. --Regina Marler --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

Like the river of its title, Tademy's saga of strong-willed black women flows from one generation to the next, from slavery to freedom. Elisabeth is a slave on a Creole plantation, as is her daughter, Suzette. The family, based on Tademy's own ancestors, wins freedom after the Civil War, but Suzette's daughter, Philomene, must struggle to keep her family together and to achieve financial independence. The melodious, expressive voices of narrators Belafonte and Payton are a pleasure

to listen to, while Moore's tougher, grittier tone conveys the hardships faced by the family. However, Belafonte and Payton sometimes ignore vocal directions provided by the novel. For example, Payton reads one passage in a whisper even though the text says "in her excitement, Philomene's voice rose... louder and louder." The complex, multigenerational tale suffers somewhat in abridgment: at times the narrative too abruptly jumps ahead by decades and some emotional situations are given short shrift, as when Philomene discovers that her daughter Bette, whom she was told died as a baby nearly 20 years earlier, is actually alive and living nearby. Still, the audio succeeds in evoking the struggles of black women to provide better lives for their children despite all odds. Simultaneous release with the Warner hardcover (Forecasts, Mar. 12). Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio Cassette edition.

I love sweeping sagas that can carry me away and catch me up in another place and time. "Cane River" did exactly that. Lalita Tademy researched the history of her family's roots in Louisiana, and put together this historical novel based on the facts that she had discovered, coupled with family lore she grew up with. The novel chronicles 137 years of her family's history, and profiles 3 different women in her family: Suzette, Philomene, and Emily. The story opens when cotton is king and Suzette is still a child on a plantation along with her mother, Elizabeth. As the story moves along through the Civil War and through Restoration and into the 20th Century, we see how the lives of child, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother weave together - how they take on their sadness and grief, and share their triumphs and joys. And through it all, for those of us who can never truly understand the experience of Black America, it gives us a glimpse, a small insight into how and why things have developed in some families of African Americans. Each of the women in this novel are people I would have liked to have met and talked to. I think they must have been fascinating individuals and I'm glad Ms. Tademy brought them to us. I so enjoyed this novel, I really didn't want to finish. I felt as though I had to say "good-bye" to some good friends and I was sad to see them leave. I know not every novel is appealing to every person, but this one truly struck a chord with me and I enjoyed it greatly.

One of the most interesting books I have ever read, based on years of the author's research into her own family's history in pre- and post-civil war Louisiana. A long, heartfelt look at the relations (over several generations, in a small community) between slaves, their white masters, and local free people of color. Well written, great character development, not a boring paragraph in the book.

A friend in hospice was given this book and told me she hoped she lived long enough to read it - unfortunately she did not. She made me copy it in my Kindle so I decided to read it for her and am very glad I did. It was disturbing to read what happened to those brave women but a wonderful testament to their strength, courage and devotion. Thank you Nelva for your parting gift. Pat Fuchs

As I read this book I found myself going through emotions that one might be if, they were reading about someone they truly loved. I mean WOW, I believe this is a book that should be read in high schools, along with books like *Killing a Mocking Bird*. This book is brilliantly written, and based on the author's journey of her own to find out what she could about her ancestors. Thankfully she was gracious enough to share her story with us. This book changed me and what I thought I knew about the history of slavery, and the general sense of what the people of that time period went through. With every page I read took me to a place much deeper than anything I could have imagined. This book is about slavery. However it also tells of the strengths, courage, and faith in which life would have been all but unbearable without. This book also tells about strong women, and the great importance of family. They lived in unimaginable conditions, Yet with every horrible unimaginable thing that happened, all the trials they endured they never gave up hope.

\*\*Spoilers\*\* The book is based on Lalita Tademy family history. She did a Fantastic job of merging historical fact and family lore into fiction. It spans 137 years of family history centered on three female characters; Suzette, Philome (Suzette's daughter by a Frenchman named Eugene Daurat) and Emily (Philomene's daughter with a white man named Narcisse Fredieu). The book covers the civil war, the end of slavery and the beginning of the Jim Crow era. They are all strong female characters but the strongest one is without a doubt Philomene. She is the one that holds the family together and is the one that is able to get to her own land after the end of slavery. Emily has five children with a Frenchman named Joseph Billes and from an early age is taught that her fair skin makes her special and places her above the Negroes and colored of the time. Nonetheless, because she was born to a mulatto woman she is considered colored in central Louisiana and her relationship with Joseph is frowned upon. When the Jim Crow laws come into effect Emily and her family are persecuted in a vicious way by the emerging Klu Klux Klan. As a result her partner is forced to marry into a white family and that marks the beginning of the end for Joseph Billes. Even though Emily and her children could pass for white in any other part of the country, Joseph and her never contemplate leaving the state of Louisiana. I read it for the first time in 2002 but enjoyed it more the second time around. I Highly recommend it.

Based on emotional impact, it was hard to read. After reading the first half of the book, I had to take an "emotion break" before finishing it. Based on that I decided not to read Red River. The action takes place in the area in which I grew up and our wonderful, loving Auntie Alberta was the child of freed slaves, born when they were much older. She didn't like to talk about it all, but her reminiscences and this book brings an ache to my heart that is overwhelming.

This book was interesting from the perspective of understanding how the rigid class divisions operated in this New Orleans region well after the Civil War, how each class struggled to maintain its own dignity but to oppress the classes perceived to be lower in the pecking order. It's a testament to these generations of women who did what they had to to survive and try to hold on to something of themselves -- hard when their 2-3 year-old children could be sold away without so much as a word. Trying to understand the level of hatred that would simply not let the white men who loved these women alone is impossible to understand. The research undertaken by the author into her family history is amazing and commendable. But the book does read more like a family history or remembrance than a story with a beginning, middle and end. And there are many main characters as the reader moves through.

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