



Book Club Discussion Guide

HOW IT HAPPENS

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

HOW IT HAPPENS follows the story of author Jean Alicia Elster's maternal grandmother, Dorothy May Jackson. Born in Tennessee in 1890, Dorothy May was the middle daughter of Addie Jackson, a married African American housekeeper at one of the white boardinghouses in town, and Tom Mitchell, a commanding white attorney from a prominent family. Through three successive generations of African American women, Elster intertwines the fictionalized adaptations of the defining periods and challenges—race relations, miscegenation, sexual assault, and class divisions—in her family's history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

A 2017 Kresge Artist Fellow in Literary Arts and a former attorney, Jean Alicia Elster (BA, University of Michigan; JD, University of Detroit School of Law) is most recently the author of the young adult novel *HOW IT HAPPENS*, published by Wayne State University Press and released in September 2021. She is the author of the novel *THE COLORED CAR*—for ages 8 and older—published by Wayne State University Press and released in September 2013. *THE COLORED CAR* was selected as a 2014 Michigan Notable Book by the Library of Michigan. Elster was awarded the 2014 Midwest Book Award in Children's Fiction for *THE COLORED CAR* by the Midwest Independent Publishers Association. *THE COLORED CAR* was chosen as an Honor Book for the 2014 Paterson Prize for Books for Young People. Elster is also the author of the novel *WHO'S JIM HINES?*—for ages 8 and older—published by Wayne State University Press and released in August 2008. *WHO'S JIM HINES?* was selected as one of the Library of Michigan's 2009 Michigan Notable Books. In addition, the Michigan Reading Association placed *WHO'S JIM HINES?* on the Great Lakes Great Books Award 2009-2010 ballot for grades 4-5. *WHO'S JIM HINES?* was also a *ForeWord Magazine* 2008 Book of the Year Award Finalist in the category of Juvenile Fiction.



PRE-READING DISCUSSION:

- Consider the illustration on the cover of the book. Describe the image that you see there.
- Book cover illustrators strive to create graphics that tell a story. In your opinion, what type of story does this illustration suggest? Who do you think might be the main character in *HOW IT HAPPENS*? Give reasons why the illustrator chose to accentuate the character's hair style in this graphic?
- Explain what the term race-relations means to you.
- The term *miscegenation* means a mixture of races; especially in marriage, cohabitation, or sexual relations between a white person and a member of another race. Tell all that you know about miscegenation. How do you think miscegenation relates to the image on the cover of the book.
- *HOW IT HAPPENS* explores miscegenation, race-relations, and intergenerational family relationships as they relate to American history. Make a connection between these terms and the title of the book.
- Predict what *HOW IT HAPPENS* is going to be about.



POST-READING DISCUSSION:

“Tom Mitchell,” Addie said his name quietly and closed her eyes. “Another baby, Tom Mitchell.” (pg. 2)

- Describe Addie’s relationship with Tom Mitchell. How did she feel about him? How do you know?
- Examine Tom’s affection for Addie. Did he love her? Explain your answer.
- Later in the story, Tom identifies himself as being Addie’s husband. Is his reasoning justifiable? How so?
- The opening scene on the book occurs in 1890, a time in history when racial segregation, Jim Crow laws, and lynching African Americans were the practices of the day. Discuss how these forms of racial discrimination might have impacted Addie and Tom’s relationship.

“You and I and Addie. We’re just as much a part of the Thomas Mitchell clan as the whole lot of them over on Cumberland Hill. Even Mrs. Mayfield knows that!” Patsy said. “You hear what I say?” (pg. 80-81)

- Why do you think Dorothy May was unaware of her true paternal heritage? Was it because of her sheltered life after the fire? Was she simply naïve?
- Analyze the complexity of Tom Mitchell’s character. Why was he compelled to force himself upon Addie? Define the risks involved for both characters. Determine the motivation behind his commitment to care for his daughters’ well-being.
- In this scene, Patsy boldly claims her birthright. Is there a price to pay for her confidence? Do you think Patsy is proud of being Tom Mitchell’s daughter? Explain your answer.
- Explore reasons why Dorothy May was Tom Mitchell’s favorite daughter. Consider how his affection for her eventually empowered generations to come.

“Indian blood covered up a multitude of sins back in the day,” she said to Jean. (pg. 201)

- Explain the reference of *Indian blood* as justification for a child’s ‘bright’ or ‘swarthy’ skin tone. Why is this important?
- Compare and contrast the terms *Indian blood* and *miscegenation*. Examine the similarities and differences between the two.
- A sin is defined as an immoral action, a transgression, or disobedience. Identify the sin Indian blood covers up, according to Carrie in this scene.
- Why does the presence of a bright-skinned child suggest that a sin has occurred?
- Define the *Negro burden* (pg. 206) from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

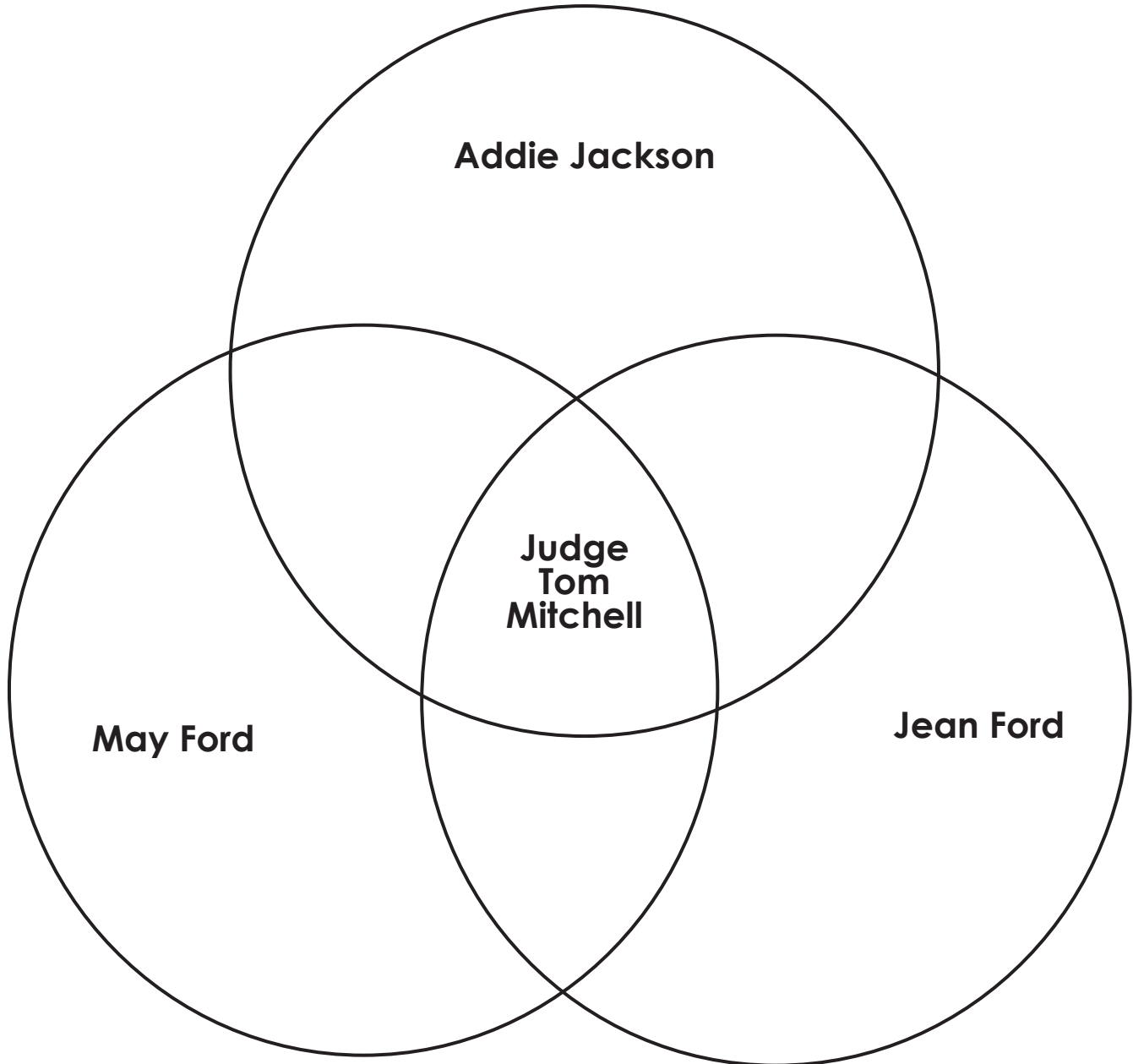
“You have choices.” (pg. 221)

- To have a *choice* means determination, power, and free will. Explain the significance of the word *choices* in this passage.
- Identify the origination of Jean’s ability to choose. Is it from determination? Power? Free will? Or is it from something else entirely? Explain your answer.
- HOW IT HAPPENS is a fictionalized story inspired by the author’s family history. Predict how the characters of Addie, May, and Jean might have influenced her determination to write the novel.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Use the Venn diagram found on this page to analyze the intergenerational connections of these four characters. Select several of the themes from the list printed below and use them as the basis of your analysis. In addition, examine the impact Judge Tom Mitchell had on each character's life individually, intergenerationally, and historically. Write an essay describing your analysis. Share your work with the group.



Thematic Exploration:

- Race relations
- Miscegenation
- History
- Love
- Commitment
- Duty
- Community
- Destiny
- Control
- Independence
- Determination
- Family

