



# COLEMAN *A Novel* HILL

“A MASTERPIECE.”

—ANDREW SEAN GREER

KIM COLEMAN FOOTE

— BOOK CLUB STARTER KIT —



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FROM THE DESK OF  
**KIM COLEMAN FOOTE**

**DEAR READER,**

*Coleman Hill* is a novel that exists somewhere between fiction and creative nonfiction. The term I prefer for it is “biomythography,” coined by Audre Lorde; it implies a work that draws from many sources to create a modern myth, a new history. To write *Coleman Hill*, I relied on family photographs and artifacts (some of which I incorporated into the book), along with oral histories, interviews, and government and legal documents.

The new history in *Coleman Hill* is that of Southern Black sharecroppers who moved to the Northern suburbs and not to the major cities commonly cited in relation to the Great Migration. It is also the new history of working-class Black people who thought themselves too ordinary to have made a mark on history. I wrote *Coleman Hill* to honor such people, whose lives I feel were far from uninteresting, and to give my family’s stories more permanence. But while there is truth to the characters in *Coleman Hill*, they’re not exactly my family; they’re based on my *imagination* of my family and their experiences.

I also wrote this book to remind some folks that Black women in this country have *always* worked, in and outside their homes, long before there was women’s liberation. I wrote this book to show that hard work is not always all that it takes. I wrote this book to stress how Black lives have historically *not* mattered, and to emphasize how Black labor has been undervalued and underappreciated. I wrote *Coleman Hill* to expose the continuum between slavery and the collective intergenerational trauma and abuse that so many Black families deem normal or “cultural”—the trauma and abuse that I know so many folks are tired of seeing portrayed, but which I plan to keep shouting about until the world stops demonizing the Black race, and until we as a people can break from these dysfunctional cycles and finally heal from our past.

Thank you for choosing *Coleman Hill* for your book club. I can’t wait for you to meet the Coleman and the Grimes families.

Kim Coleman Foote



## BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. The author has called the book “a biomythography”—a word coined by the late great writer Audre Lorde—because it combines the author’s own family history with fiction. Why do you think the author chose to define her novel this way? What effect did it have on the reading experience?
2. *Coleman Hill* is written in the first-, second-, and third-person at different points. How did the alternating points of views impact your connection to the characters? How did the author’s writing style contribute to your reading experience?
3. Which character did you sympathize with the most? Who did you have the most trouble with? Why?
4. In the book, different characters have different interpretations of interpretations of pivotal family events. Why do you think this is done? What do you think it says about the way memory informs our understanding of ourselves and the world around us?
5. Which photograph or artifact in the book intrigued you the most and why?
6. The characters perceive their own and others’ skin color, hair, weight, and other physical attributes in both positive and negative ways. How are their beauty standards impacted by mainstream culture like Hollywood movies?
7. In the book, women are expected to marry young, boys and men are expected to hold back tears, and children are expected to be quiet around adults. How do these and other expectations shape the characters’ lives? Which of these expectations are still prevalent today?
8. Explore the theme of generational trauma. What behavioral patterns are passed down in the book? How do they affect the younger generations?
9. The novel’s epigraphs are from Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming* and Elizabeth Strouth’s *My Name Is Lucy Barton*. Talk about why the author might have chosen these two passages and how they relate to *Coleman Hill*.

## RECOMMENDED READING FROM KIM COLEMAN FOOTE

### CLASSIC AND LESSER KNOWN BLACK NOVELS INSPIRED BY GENEALOGY

*Jubilee* by Margaret Walker (1966) – Walker’s family relocated from Georgia to Abbeville, Alabama, soon after the Civil War ended. Just like some of my Coleman ancestors . . . perhaps our families met! And there’s even a character named Grimes.

*Queen: The Story of an American Family* by Alex Haley and David Stevens (1994) – Confession: I’ve never read *Roots* (though it’s on my shelf!). But I *did* read this one, about another branch of Haley’s family. I was so inspired after seeing the corresponding made-for-TV movie.

*Those the Sun Has Loved* by Rose Jourdain (1978) – Published not long after *Roots* and just as epic, though not nearly as known. I love that the story starts in South America. Here in the US, we rarely learn about African slavery there, even though it operated on a much larger scale.

### GREAT MIGRATION: NONFICTION READS

*The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson (2010) – Details the lives of three people who experienced the second wave of the Migration, around World War II onward. Don’t let the heft of this book deter you. The engrossing stories and writing style made it a page-turner for me.

*Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers and the Great Migration* by Elizabeth Clark-Lewis (1996) – Also based on interviews. Hear the experiences of “the help” from their own perspectives, with a focus on Washington, DC.

### RACE, LOVE, AND MENTAL HEALTH

*All About Love: New Visions* by bell hooks (2000) – Completely transformed my thinking of love, as an action—not a feeling—and one that affirms in all ways. Hint: nothing like the versions typically presented in music and on screen.

*Defying the Verdict: My Bipolar Life* by Charita Cole Brown (2018) – A Black woman’s mental health journey, written with grace, insight, and even humor. Invites understanding of, and empathy for, people experiencing this illness.

*My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem (2017) – A thought-provoking overview of the origins of racialized trauma in the US. Also provides valuable exercises for calming the nervous system to reduce trauma responses for both perpetrators and receivers.