

Newspaper Discussion Questions – *Yellow Wife* by Sadeqa Johnson

WEEK 1

What did you know about slavery in American history before reading the novel? Had you heard about “yellow wives” before? If not, why do you think that is?

Miss Sally took care to teach Pheby and become a mother figure in her life. Why do you think she did this and what impact did it have on Pheby’s future?

WEEK 2

Why do you think the Jailer chose Pheby to become his “wife?” As her oppressor, can he actually “love” her? What would have happened to Pheby if she had refused or resisted her role as mistress of the jail?

Pheby and Essex each face different challenges in their lives. How does their treatment differ and how does their gender affect their survival strategies?

WEEK 3

Since she was a child, Pheby was promised her freedom. How do you think that expectation affected her resilience and choices throughout the novel? What expectations should we have for ourselves in the face of adversity?

Pheby finds different ways to cope with her situation, including writing the names of the “fancy” girls in her diary. Why do you think this is so important to her? How else does she cope with life at the Devil’s Half Acre?

WEEK 4

Sadeqa Johnson chose to write about a dark period of American history, touching on issues such as torture, sexual violence, and racism. As a result, some scenes in the novel may have been difficult to read. How would the story be affected if these depictions or events were excluded? Do you think they were necessary?

Pheby’s daughters choose different paths at the end of the book. Some go to Massachusetts to pursue an education, but Birdie decides to stay with Pheby, rather than pass for white. Why do you think she made that choice? What challenges will each of the sisters face?