

First Thursday Book Group Discussion Questions**Varina**

by Charles Frazier

May 2, 2019, 2pm. Carol Brain hosts. Kay Pankratz leads the discussion

1. How would you describe Varina Davis? Talk about her upbringing and consider the passage below: Does it ring true?

At sixteen—other than overwhelming scorn and rage—what power do you control? For the pimply boys V knew, it was guns and their prospects for inheritance. Girls had their bodies and minds. That age, you make choices and don't always know you're making them.

2. Comparisons have been made with *Varina* to *Gone With the Wind*, in terms of the stories themselves and especially the two heroines. Do you see similarities?

3. Consider this next passage regarding V's feelings toward slavery:

V has never made any claim of personal high ground. She grew up where and when she did. From earliest memory, owning other people was a given. But she began feeling the strangeness of it about nine or ten—not the wrongness or the sin of it, but the strangeness only.

In what way did slavery begin to feel strange to V?

4. Next, consider this passage:

[B]eing on the wrong side of history carries consequences. V lives that truth every day. If you've done terrible things, lived a terribly [sic] way, profited from pain in the face of history's power to judge, then guilt and loss accrue.

In what way does V live the truth? And what is the "truth"—as she understands it? Has her understanding changed over the years?

5. How would you describe V's marriage with Jefferson Davis? Take into account the considerable age gap, as well as their differing personalities and beliefs.

6. In what way does Limber Jimmie/James Blake stand as a critique of V? How do their separate memories reveal their different experiences? What insights of America's greatest sin and greatest crisis do you, as a reader, gain from both characters' revelations?

7. V claims that "the right side won." Overall, how would you describe her attitude toward, and her understanding of, slavery? What do you think she would think about today's removal of the South's many civil war hero statues, including her husband's?

8. In her *Washington Post* review, Mary Doria Russell writes of Frazier's novel:

Elegiac without being exculpatory, it is an indictment of complicity without ignoring the historic complexity of the great evil at the core of American history.

Care to unpack that statement? What does Russell mean by "without ignoring the historical complexity"? What is complex about slavery: isn't it a case of black and white?

9. The book's timeline shifts frequently. Did you find this confusing or distracting? Or does the shifting perfectly reveal the fractured nature of memories, as well as the way the past bleeds continually into the present?