



THE HOME PLACE

Memoirs of a Colored
Man's Love Affair with
Nature

By J. Drew
Lanham

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Discussion Questions

1. *The Home Place* questions identity and how the place you come from influences who you are, how you think about the world. How does Lanham consider the ways his identity has been questioned because of his origins and his profession? Consider the introduction and the chapter “Birding While Black.” [151-158]

2. How does Lanham’s vocation as a scientist and a birder shape his view of home? How does his experience as an ornithologist inform his view of the natural world and his place in it? How does studying creatures of the air flavor his relationship with earthbound things?

3. Lanham writes, “To help others understand nature is to make it breathe like some giant: a revolving, evolving, celestial being with ecosystems acting as organs and the living things within those places—humans included—as cells vital to its survival. My hope is that somehow I might move others to find themselves magnified in nature, whomever and wherever they might be.” [6] What might this look like in our lives, in different places around the country, with our busy lives? How do we make room for nature?

4. Lanham’s grandmother, Mamatha, loved gardening and thought very highly of the remedies she made from the plants. From vegetables to flowers, why do we gain such joy and fulfillment from gardening? How does gardening relate to the building theme of home in this memoir?

5. Lanham’s descriptions of his Home Place and Mamatha’s Ramshackle are drawn through his relationships with various members of his family. How much of the places that mean something to us are also (or largely) a result of the people? Is home a physical place or is it the people? How do we know? Can these ideas of home be different for different people?

6. Lanham writes, “All of these Home Place things haunt me pleasantly. They are the ghosts I conjure up from time to time to help me understand who I am and perhaps recapture who I need to be.” [33] What are the ghosts that you conjure? Where (or what) do you return to remember who you need to be? What are the touchstones in your life?

7. The women in Lanham’s life—Mamatha, Mama, his sisters, more—play a pivotal role in his sense of himself and how he is shaped by the landscape. Discuss how each of these women crossed the boundaries of stereotypical women of the South, the way they often appear in literature.

8. *The Home Place* occupies a series of boundaries—and boundary crossings—ecological, social, racial, economic. His hometown is called Edgefield, after all. Where do you see these edges? How is his engagement with these boundaries integral to his relationship with his history, his family’s land, and what their future as a family looks like?

9. Mamatha has no trouble embracing both the supernatural and the Christian world (perhaps the supernatural?), from ghosts to remedies for illnesses and more. Lanham considers the fundamentalist religious world of Jeter to the more tolerant world of Mt. Canaan, but in conjunction with the education he received. His parents were teachers and Lanham eventually earned his PhD. His worldview, though, of embracing both the empirical and faith-in-what-we-cannot-see, is essential to his sense of self and clearly comes from Mamatha. Where do you see these kinds of intersections in his life? Do you have similar boundary-crossings in yours?

10. Structurally, Lanham ends with the search for his ancestors and the dying of the Home Place. Why do you think he choose to put this section at the end, rather including his ancestors’ story in the “Flock” [11-96] section of the book? What effect does it have on your reading?



A native of Edgefield, South Carolina, J. Drew Lanham is the author of *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature*, which received the Reed Award from the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Southern Book Prize, and was a finalist for the John Burroughs Medal. He is a birder, naturalist, and hunter-conservationist who has published essays and poetry in publications including *Orion*, *Audubon*, *Flycatcher*, and *Wilderness*, and in several anthologies, including *The Colors of Nature*, *State of the Heart*, *Bartram's Living Legacy*, and *Carolina Writers at Home*. Lanham is a 2022 MacArthur Fellow. An Alumni Distinguished Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Master Teacher at Clemson University, he and his family live in the Upstate of South Carolina, a soaring hawk's downhill glide from the southern Appalachian escarpment that the Cherokee once called the Blue Wall.

Reading Reflections

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