

## HOW TO START YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB

Think it would be hard to start your own book club? Think again! All you need are some friends who are as excited about the books they read as you are and a little bit of organization.

### HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO GET YOU STARTED:

**The best way to find people to be in your book club is to ask your friends.** Think of all the people you know who like to read, and ask them to join. If you still don't feel like you have enough people, ask each of your friends to bring someone else. You can usually get a good discussion going with 6–8 people, but any number that is comfortable for you will work. If you're having trouble finding enough cool people to form your club, check with your school, local library, or bookstore to see if there's a group that you can join.

### Figure out when and where you want to meet.

Some groups meet once a month, some meet every other month. You could get together at someone's house, in a park, on the beach, or in your school's library. If it sounds too official and overwhelming to decide all the "wheres" and "whens" right now, don't worry! It's YOUR group so YOU get to make all the decisions. All you have to do is get together once, and you can work out the rest of the details later.

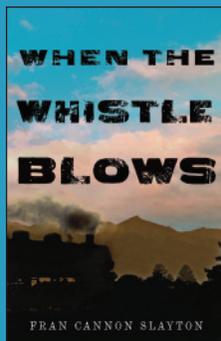
### Decide how you will choose books, and how the discussions will be run.

Maybe you have a favorite author that you and your friends would like to focus on. Or maybe you want to take turns picking your favorite book. Maybe one person likes to talk and would like to lead the discussion, or maybe you would rather just get together and talk about the books you are reading. Maybe you want to try having a different group leader each week. If you get stuck, you can often find discussion questions online (try the publisher's website) or at your local library or bookstore.

**The most important thing to remember is that there's no right or wrong way to have a book club. Do what you're comfortable with and always have fun, and your group will be a success!**

For more discussion guides to get your group going, visit  
[www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians](http://www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians)

## A TIMELESS STORY FROM A FIRST-TIME NOVELIST



### When the Whistle Blows

by Fran Cannon Slayton  
978-0-399-25189-4 (HC) • \$16.99  
Ages 10 up • Grades 5 up

**"With wit and warmth Fran Cannon Slayton recounts a steam-driven coming-of-age story . . ."**

—Richard Peck, Newbery-winning author of *A Year Down Yonder*

**"When the Whistle Blows is reminiscent of classic tales by Jack London, William Golding, and Robert Louis Stevenson . . ."**

—Ellen Hopkins, author of *New York Times* bestsellers *Crank* and *Identical*

*Every time I go to jump on a steam train as it chugs its way though Rowlesburg—*

*Every time I throw out my hands to grab the rusty metal rungs and haul myself up onto the side of one of them black coal cars, hoisting my knees up over its churning, screeching wheels—*

*Every single time I jump on a train—my heart thumps even noisier in my ears than the clanking of the old iron horse I'm hopping up onto. I love steam trains. I love living in a town that's chock full of 'em. I love being on 'em being anywhere near 'em. They're as much a part of my life around here as the mountains. Or breathing.*

*But it's a dangerous business, hopping a ride onto a moving train. First off, there's always a right decent chance of getting killed. Second, and about ten thousand times worse, my father might find out.*

*But I'm not like Dad—I don't mind breaking the rules now and again.*



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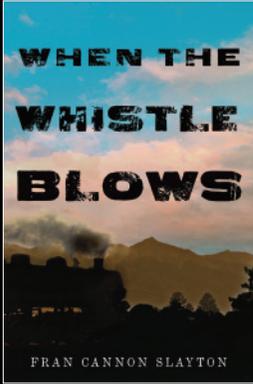
Discussion Guide ISBN: 978-0-399-25300-3

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

# WHEN THE WHISTLE BLOWS

FRAN CANNON SLAYTON

## ABOUT THE BOOK



*When the railroad's in your blood, it draws you like a pump draws water from the ground.*

Meet a town and a train and a time and a boy—Jimmy Cannon. And meet his father—as strong as a Mallet locomotive—whom Jimmy simply cannot figure out. But who, in a dramatic and unexpected twist, turns out to be so much more than Jimmy ever knew.

In a book that goes to the core of boyhood—its Halloween mischief, its hunting day mystery, its championship football game surprise, and its nighttime adventures—Fran Cannon Slayton brings her readers to the breathtaking crossroads of an unforgettable West Virginia railroad town, a family that matters, and adulthood itself.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**FRAN CANNON SLAYTON** found her inspiration for *When the Whistle Blows* from the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove and “stories my father, aunts, uncles, and cousins told me about Rowlesburg, West Virginia.”

Fran first began reading Dove’s book shortly after beginning *When the Whistle Blows*. “At some point I stopped reading with a jolt.” She realized that, like Dove, she wanted to create a narrative through vignettes about Jimmy and his train town. “They are all separate stories, but they created a rather beautiful whole.”

Fran Cannon Slayton lives with her family in Charlottesville, Virginia. Visit her at [www.francannonslayton.com](http://www.francannonslayton.com)

## PRE-READING RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

- What does it mean for a book to be considered historical fiction? How does the foreword to *When the Whistle Blows* help you answer this question?
- Research the time period of 1943 through 1949. What was happening across the United States during those years? What was happening in Rowlesburg, West Virginia? Compare and contrast your findings to the Rowlesburg Fran Cannon Slayton describes in *When the Whistle Blows* and to the story she has Jimmy tell.
- Use the Internet and your local or school library to learn more about the history of our railroad system. How did it begin? How did the railroad change the country? Research steam and diesel engines and compare and contrast the two. How did the invention of diesel engines affect the railroad industry and the lives of people across the United States? What evidence of this do you find in *When the Whistle Blows*?
- Research the great potato famine that took place in Ireland. What connection does this time period have to Jimmy and his family?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the foreword to *When the Whistle Blows*, Fran Cannon Slayton says, “Fiction has been described as ‘the lie that tells the truth.’” What do you think she means by this? Find evidence within the story and the foreword to support your opinion.
- Each chapter in this novel takes place on a different All Hallows’ Eve. What significance does this particular day hold for Jimmy? How does having each chapter take place on the same day, one year later, influence the storyline? Does Jimmy change from year to year? Does his father? Does their relationship? How so? Why?
- Why does Jimmy want to work on the railroad?
- Describe Jimmy’s relationship with his two brothers, Bill and Mike. What is Jimmy’s impression of each of them at the beginning of the novel? Do his feelings change by the end? What role do they play in each others’ lives?
- How would you describe Jimmy’s relationship with his father? What do they mean to each other and how do they choose to express their feelings? At one point, Jimmy says, “I know I’ll never understand that man. Even if I live to see another hundred All Hallows’ Eves.” Does this statement prove to be true? What happens in the story that makes Jimmy begin to look at his father differently?

- What role does Jimmy’s mother play in the story?
- Who are the members of The Platoon? What does friendship mean to them? How do they show loyalty to each other throughout the story?
- Define the word “progress”. How is progress represented throughout the book? Is it positive? Negative? Both?
- Mr. Evans says, “ ‘There is a little thing we in the civilized world call ‘progress’ . . . And like it or not I am bringing it to this little hick town of yours.’ ” What does he mean by this? Does he succeed? Jimmy says, “As far as I’m concerned, progress is just another word for screwing things up that are perfectly fine just the way they are.” Do you agree with him? How does progress touch each of the main characters?
- Jimmy’s dad says, “ ‘Rules are rules.’ ” List the rules that you can find evidence of in the novel. Are rules ever broken? Why?
- Why do you think Heevie doesn’t give Jimmy’s presence away when Jimmy’s hiding, watching The Society barricade the doors to the school before First Day?
- Why does the football team create a ritual around Jimmy’s father before every game? What does Jimmy’s dad mean when he says, “ ‘I knew you boys could win the championship from the very first scrimmage . . . You just needed someone to tell you that you couldn’t.’ ”? Do you agree with him?
- Why does Jimmy’s father finally take him to the M&K? What do you think Jimmy’s dad is hoping to prove or to show Jimmy? What are Jimmy’s expectations? Does Jimmy feel the same about being a train machinist at the end of the novel as he did at the beginning?
- Discuss the character of Thaddeus Ore. What role does he play in the life of the town—if any? What happens to Jimmy the night that Thaddeus is attacked? What happens to his father?
- What is The Society? What does it mean to Jimmy at the beginning of the novel? At the end? Why is membership so important?
- What do you think it would be like to live in a town that revolved around one industry like Rowlesburg revolves around the railroad? How would your life be different? The same?
- Does Jimmy decide to follow his father’s and brothers’ footsteps and work on the railroad? Why or why not? What finally helps him make this decision? What do you imagine Jimmy’s life is like on the next All Hallows’ Eve after the story ends?