

Discussion Questions for Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* Reviewer, Tracy Floreani – June 8 at 6:30 p.m.

1. In what ways does this novel challenge your understanding of the history of slavery in the U.S.? What does it reaffirm in your understanding of that history?
2. Even though Jones is very well read on the history of slavery and the history of Virginia, all the data, people, events, and many of the places and publications in the story are completely made-up. What do you think is the artist's goal in messing with history like this? What is the effect of made-up history on us readers (especially when it seems so convincing)? What are some of the real truths in this piece of imaginative fiction?
3. The structure of the story is non-linear (non-chronological). What is the effect of that disjointed sequencing on the story's meaning? (apart from sometimes confusing us!)
4. In depicting the social history of the fictional Manchester County, Virginia, Jones includes a very large cast of characters. What do you think is his purpose in doing so? Which characters stand out most to you, and why?
5. Do you think Henry Townsend is a well-developed protagonist, or simply a device for keeping the story moving? If he's not the protagonist, who is?
6. Explore the types of symbolism layered into the story, and how they enhance the ideas the author is getting at/the questions he is raising. Some examples:
 - the slave Moses' name
 - the setting of Washington , D.C., at the novel's end
 - maps, in general, and the specific ones: the one on Sheriff Skiffington's wall (Ch. 5, p. 174), in the patroller Barnum Kinsey's family belongings (Ch. 9, p. 304), and Alice's artistic map in the D.C. hotel (epilogue letter, p. 384)
 - Milton's *Paradise Lost* in Henry's education (Ch.1, p. 6 and Ch. 4, pp. 134-35)
 - William Robbins' "big book" (Ch. 4, p. 140)

- Augustus' carved walking sticks
 - Counsel Skiffington's journey
 - and any others you can think of
7. In some ways, the category of race gets put in a second-tier position in this story to focus instead on the theme of power. Explore the various types of power (or lack of power) experienced by various characters, and what provides or denies them access to those forms of power. What do you think is the book's ultimate commentary on this topic?