

A Child is a Poem You Learn by Heart (Paulette Whitehurst)

Discussion Questions:

1. How would describe the cultural values of Paulette's family?
2. How would you describe the religious values of the Paulette's family? How did Mama's beliefs affect the decisions she made for herself and for her daughter? Give examples.
3. Why do you think John Henry beat Mama? Why did Mama leave and then go back to him again and again?
4. What was the significance of Paulette's name? Why was it important to Mama? Is your name significant to you personally?
5. Paulette was expected to assume responsibility for many household chores and care for her younger siblings. Was this a typical practice in your family when you were growing up? What were your family responsibilities? How did these shape your life?
6. During her growing up years in Charleston, SC, the author was allowed to attend church, visit libraries and museums, and ride her bike all over town all on her own. Was that customary for that day and time? How is that different from now?
7. During the teen years, the author and her mother seemed to grow apart. What, in your opinion, contributed to this?
8. In your own life, did you ever express the thought that you would change something from the way you were raised? What changes did you make when raising your own children?

9. The lives of children today are often full of after school activities from athletics, to clubs, to private lessons. Mama never considered enrolling her daughter in any activities. Can you think of any benefit the author gained from that freedom?

10. Paulette's teachers made such an impression on her that she grew up to be a teacher herself. What impact did your teachers have on your life? Think about teachers who influenced you. Who were they?

11. The subject of the poems in this book reflected various themes, among them love, sadness, despair, and hope. Choose a couple of poems or poem passages that tugged at your heart. Why have you chosen these?

12. Re-read the poem at the beginning of the book (p. 5). What do you think Paulette was trying to say in this poem?