

*Not Free, Not for All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow* by Cheryl Knott

Book club Thursday 2/29/24 at 5:30 PM at Comstock Township Library

Discussion questions

1) What were your initial thoughts on the topic of *Not Free, Not for All*?

2) Was this book difficult for you to read? If so, what would have made it easier or more enjoyable?

3)

"A system of law, economics, politics, ideology, and brutality worked to preserve slavery. Denying access to abolitionist pamphlets, newspapers, and books was one practice that maintained the status quo," (p. 23).

"The north-south alliance understood not only that education could fit workers for their role in the economic system but also that black workers had an essential and distinct role within the system," (p. 25).

The quotes above explain the white opposition to educating Black people, who if educated would have other employment choices besides labor jobs and could then also qualify for voting since they could pass literacy requirements. With these ideas in mind, why would the majority of white people have opposed library services for Blacks?

4) Cash crop farming in the South wasn't very profitable (p. 43), yet Southern states funded "two separate but similar institutions in a region that required racial segregation," (p. 44). How did the belief system of white supremacy and fear of "racial mixing" override the economic reality that proved segregation was a disadvantage? How do fear and other emotions affect logical thinking?

5) Booker T. Washington wanted Black people to cooperate with segregation (p. 33). Later, Knott states, "The success of library segregation can be interpreted as a positive development. At a time when most southern blacks had no access to libraries, Louisville's African Americans had convenient access to books, story times, and other services, no matter where they lived in town. It can also be seen as a negative development that ensconced racial segregation in a city agency," (p. 64). What do you think of the idea of accepting substandard library service as opposed to having none at all? Could it be seen as a stepping stone to further progress, or an impediment to pushing for greater change by encouraging complacency with a lesser service?

6) The Carnegie Foundation allowed local laws and practices to decide who libraries would be opened to, whereas the Rosenwald Foundation “required libraries to provide equitable service to all county residents,” (p. 89). Could Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie Foundation have taken a stand to make their libraries available to all? How you think that would have changed the situation?

7) If you walked into a school, library, business, or other place and you were threatened, rejected, or otherwise turned away, what would you do?

8) If you had a poor education or no education at all, do you think you would seek knowledge? How would you acquire knowledge if school was not an option?

9) Are there any books about Black history or any books by Black authors you have enjoyed and would like to recommend?

Videos – we will watch parts of these during the book club

Auburn Avenue Research Library. (2018). The desegregation of public libraries in the Jim Crow South. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7dIX2pDNI>

Choices Program. (2012). What was it like growing up in Alabama under Jim Crow? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3p8tTij3EoY>

Article

National Museum of African American History and Culture. Booker T. Washington and the ‘Atlanta Compromise’. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/booker-t-washington-and-atlanta-compromise>