



Discussion Questions / Book Group Guide

prepared by Dr. Ruth Harper

1. This book is meticulously researched. What did you learn about the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862 that was new to you or differed from what you may have been taught about that conflict?
2. Sometimes, when people read historical fiction (or even just history), they imagine how they would react, survive, endure, behave if they were alive at the time and place explored by the book. What thoughts did you have about how you would cope in such a time and place as are described in this story? What do you have in common with Sarah Wakefield, if anything? How do you differ from her? What choices might you have made in her circumstances?
3. Let's take the questions above one step further. Empathy is not how YOU would react or behave in the circumstances; it is the ability to truly imagine the lived experience of another. This is especially challenging if that person differs from you in gender, race, socio-economic status/privilege, ability/disability, faith tradition, sexual orientation, generation—you name it. Phyllis Cole-Dai demonstrates extraordinary empathy in her writing; you can sense her effort to inhabit her characters, particularly Sarah Wakefield, in this book. Where do you notice this most in *Beneath the Same Stars*? Are there places in the story where your own empathy differs from the author's? How does fiction, historical and otherwise, help us as readers expand our understanding of humanity in ways that non-fiction might not?
4. Because the author uses the (racist, sexist) language and imagery of the day, this book can be upsetting. Think about (and discuss) what it must have been like to speak those words—for example, to think of Indigenous people as inferior, savage creatures. Then consider what it must have been like to be Native in those times, surrounded by these words and beliefs. Finally, contemplate how much of this notion of white superiority persists in today's society. Does the fact that the novel is written in the present tense make the racism more “real” for you?
5. Cultural appropriation generally refers to people of the dominant culture adopting identities or practices of another culture, often for personal benefit. Sometimes this is done “innocently” (as in the case, perhaps, of Senator Elizabeth Warren, who accepted and passed along a family story about a Cherokee ancestor without being culturally American Indian herself in any way—and did profit from it professionally). In *Beneath the Same Stars*, in what ways and why does Sarah Wakefield display what today might be called cultural appropriation? Is she justified in doing so, do you think? Why or why not? One example is when she initiates the false rumor that her heritage includes a Narragansett forebear and thus she and her children will be “perfectly safe” when Little Crow executes captives (p. 145). What other instances of this do you see in her behavior? Discuss.
6. What questions do you have for author Phyllis Cole-Dai? What do you like best about this book? What will you remember from this story? Which aspects, if any, trouble you? Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not?