

A Novel
Based on a
True Story

THE AMERICAN QUEEN

There is only one
known queen who
ruled a kingdom on
American soil.
This is her story.

Book Club
Kit

VANESSA MILLER

Based on the true story of the only queen – a Black woman – that ruled a kingdom on American soil.

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up *The American Queen*. I hope it speaks to your heart in the way it spoke to mine. The hardest part of writing this historical novel was the hours, days, and weeks I spent researching information about the people in the Happy Land and the time period. It has been my greatest honor to write this story about a moment in our history that most people know nothing about.

Yes, there once were a king and queen in America, and they had been enslaved before the Civil War. They built an all-for-one-and-one-for-all society—something that we might consider a socialist society. But it was their way of making sure that all would be cared for and treated with respect after enduring the dehumanization and demoralization that came with slavery.

As I researched for this book, I fell in love with this story and Queen Louella's compassion for the people she served, for their kingdom was not about what the people could do for them but more about how they could benefit each other.

I truly pray that you enjoyed this retelling of the Kingdom of the Happy Land. I hope you enjoy the journey. And I pray that *The American Queen* sticks with you long after you close the book. I hope the goodness of many of the people in this novel shines through and blesses you in some way. Getting to know the only queen ever to rule on American soil has been a great honor.

Long live the memory of Queen Louella!

Blessings,

Vanessa

Vanessa



REVIEWS AND PRAISE

"*The American Queen* brings to light another hidden triumph in Black American history. Queen Louella is frankly a woman that everyone should know. Filled with bravery and cultural beauty, this marvel of a novel transported me while educating me on the sheer determination of an emancipated community to not only survive but to also thrive."

-Sadeqa Johnson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The House of Eve*

"Being a hero during the Civil War era took on lots of different forms. One woman, hero Louella, is the subject of award-winning author Vanessa Miller's latest historical novel . . . This powerful story must be told and retold."

- GMA's New Books to Read for the New Year

"*The American Queen* is beautifully told, a story rife with struggle, intrigue, and the indomitable spirit of a woman strong enough to carry the weight of a community, bold enough to dream the impossible, and determined enough to fashion dreams into reality. Louella Montgomery is a woman for the ages. I loved traveling alongside her and meeting the people of The Happy Land."

-Lisa Wingate #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Book of Lost Friends*

"Regal, self-possessed with inner strength and dignity—that's the portrayal of Luella Bobo Montgomery in Vanessa Miller's *The American Queen*. Miller crafts a stellar image of resilience, giving life to a little-known story of American royalty. There's something special, soul-stirring to read of a woman, a wife, a queen building a space with her husband and found family that makes a community's hope of freedom come true. Everyone should read *The American Queen* and be inspired."

-Vanessa Riley, award-winning author of *Island Queen* and *Queen of Exiles*

"Miller (*The Light on Halsey Street*) captivates with a propulsive historical based on the true story of a group of formerly enslaved people who founded a utopian society in the Appalachian mountains in the 1860s...readers will be won over by Louella's gumption, optimism, and tenacity. Miller brings to enthralling life a hidden gem in American history."

-*Publishers Weekly*

REVIEWS AND PRAISE

"Queen Louella, *The American Queen*, is a character so richly drawn, she writes the story of American history. Born into slavery, robbed of her mother and family, Louella has no reason to love or be loved. However, the superb Vanessa Miller has created a new world of possibility and the story takes flight. The impossible path to forgiveness is as arduous as the road to freedom is for the enslaved. When Louella decides it's her world, one that she will make her own in emancipation, the sky opens up and rains hope. This novel is a triumph."

—Adriana Trigiani, bestselling author of *The Good Left Undone*

"Vanessa Miller's page-turner *The American Queen* takes readers on a winding journey through the horrors and triumphs of the post-Civil War / Reconstruction era to show how a broken formerly enslaved woman transforms into an actual queen over her people. Louella Bobo Montgomery emerges from a Mississippi plantation with a vision of a 'happy land' where her people will live together in peace and with dignity. Turning that vision into a reality, however, tests the very foundations of her faith. *The American Queen* is a moving, heartwarming story that reminds us that all things are possible with faith, hope, love, and forgiveness."

—Kaia Alderson, author of *Sisters in Arms*

"Some books just feel inspired. You feel blessed for having read them. They feel like a gift. This is one of those books. *The American Queen* is definitely a story everyone should know, and a year from now, I have a feeling they will. Put it at the top of your bookstagram reading list."

—Jamie Ford, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Many Daughters of Afong Moy*

"*The American Queen* by Vanessa Miller is a rich, multilayered saga of a little-known true story that completely captivated me with one of the strongest and most compelling protagonists I've ever read. The dreams of Louella Montgomery were strong enough to infuse an entire community and carry them on the wings of hope off the plantation. I had to blink several times to come back to the present after finishing the last page of this wonderful novel. Everyone should read this book!"

—Colleen Coble, *USA TODAY* bestselling author

BOOK CLUB IDEAS

Book clubs are about reading good books, of course, but they also provide great opportunities, such as making connections, socializing with friends, considering different perspectives, enjoying delicious snacks, and maybe even learning something new.

Below is the recipe for the apple muffins mentioned in the book. They are perfect to make for your book club discussions, whether you're gathering in person or virtually. If your book club meets in person, make sure to take pictures and tag Vanessa on social media when you post (see back cover for social profiles and website).

APPLE BERRY MUFFIN



INGREDIENTS:

1 large egg	1 tsp salt
1 cup milk	1 tsp vanilla extract
½ cup unsalted butter, melted	½ cup frozen raspberries
2 cups all-purpose flour	½ cup frozen blueberries
⅓ cup granulated sugar	½ cup diced fresh apple
1 tbsp baking powder	

STEP 1

Preheat oven to 400° F. Line 12 muffin cups with paper liners.

STEP 2

Melt the butter in a saucepan allow to continue to cook until it browns gently. Browning the butter will happen suddenly and spread quickly, so don't leave the stove during this time. Remove from heat immediately and let cool for 10 minutes.

STEP 3

In a large bowl, beat the egg. Beat in milk and butter until well combined. Stir in flour, sugar,

baking powder and salt until just moistened. Gently fold in vanilla, raspberries, blueberries and apples.

STEP 4

Divide the batter evenly between the muffin cups – I like to use an ice cream scoop for this step. Bake for 22-26 minutes, until tops are golden brown, and a toothpick inserted in the center pulls out clean.

STEP 5

Let muffins cool until they can be touched.

AUTHOR Q&A WITH VANESSA MILLER

Vanessa has been asked many questions about the book and wanted to share answers to a few of the most commonly asked questions. These are great conversation points for your book club discussions.

WAS THERE REALLY A KING AND QUEEN IN AMERICA?

Most kingdoms begin after one culture invades another, takes their land and then proclaims themselves king or queen of that land. America has typically been known as a democratic, rule of law country, not a monarchy. Then here comes this group of people after slavery was abolished and the North claimed victory over the South. Like wanderers, they journey to a land that God would give them. Once they possess the land (about 200 acres), they proclaim it as a kingdom and rule it in a socialistic manner where everyone in the kingdom brought all the money earned to the king. The king and queen then distributed the money back to the people after making sure there were enough funds to build homes and buy land. So yes, I believe there really was a kingdom set up in America.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THIS STORY?

I truly believe in defining moments... in that one thing that happens to reshape the way you look at life, love or even your career. For me that moment occurred after I sat down in front of my computer one day to email #1 NYT bestselling author, Lisa Wingate. I thanked her for the endorsement she provided for my book, *Something Good*. I also told her that I enjoyed her novel, *The Book of Lost Friends*. When Lisa emailed me back, she informed me that she'd learned of the story for that particular book from a Facebook friend. She said, another Facebook friend told her about The Kingdom of the Happy Land people also. She then began to explain to me how Black people created their own kingdom in the Appalachian Mountains, on land that spanned the distance between North and South Carolina.

I was simply blown away. I began researching the information and knew with each new discovery that I had to write this story.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THEMES/ISSUES IN THE BOOK?

- A woman fighting for position in a man's world, issues that we still deal with today are heavily addressed in this book.
- How hate can be overcome with love and forgiveness.
- The way in which racism and bondage denies the human spirit the ability to thrive and become all God created us to be.
- Restored dignity for a people whose dignity had been stripped by the mental and physical toll of slavery.
- Finding hope and trust in God again, after loss.

THE IDEA OF A KING AND QUEEN IN AMERICA GOES AGAINST THE NON-ARISTOCRATIC NORMS IN AMERICA, WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM THIS HIDDEN GEM OF A STORY?

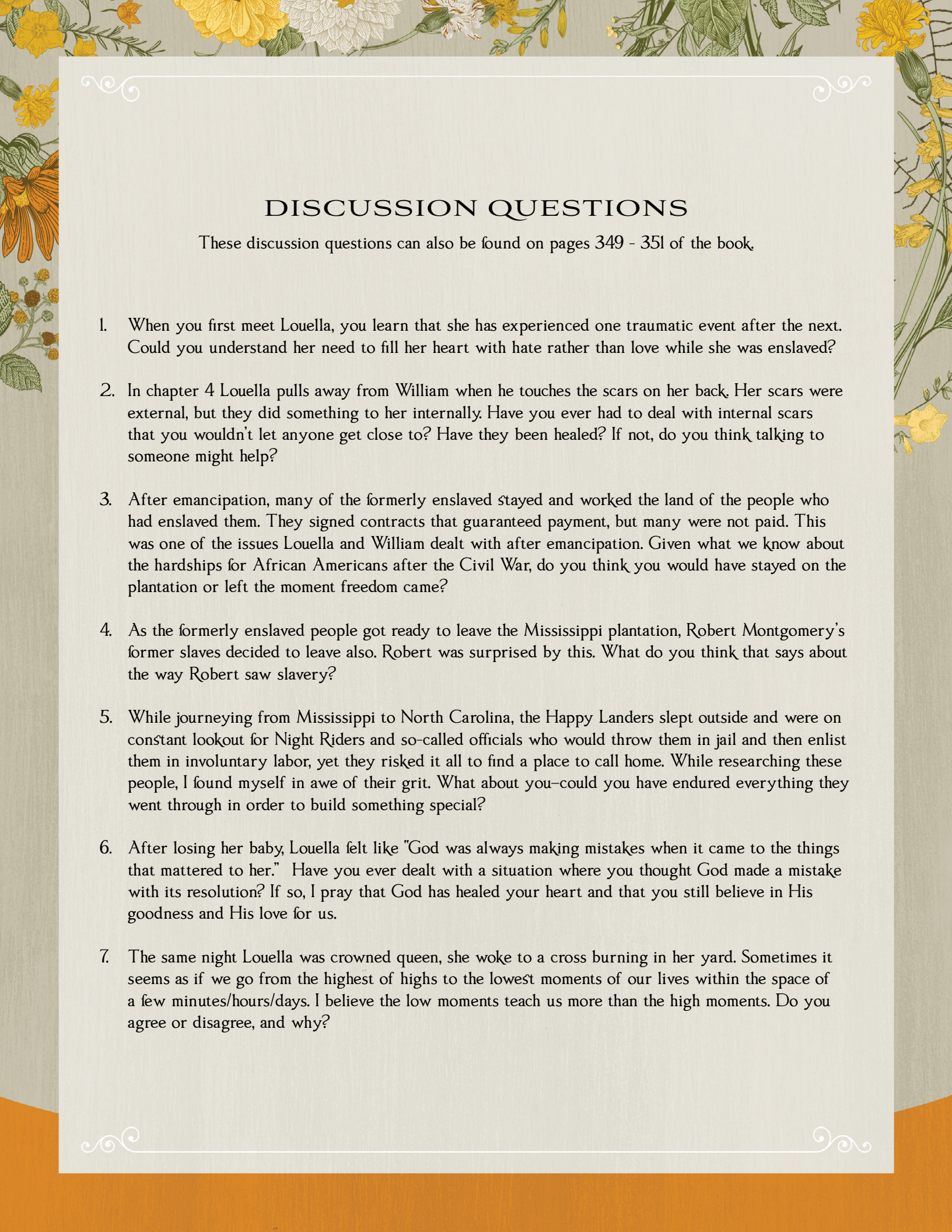
When readers begin the journey through *The American Queen*, I want them to discover the grit and determination it took for newly freed people to dream of a better way of life. I want them to discover the unsung true history of a kingdom that was built as a refuge for weary travelers, who like Moses searched out their promised land.

AUTHOR Q&A WITH VANESSA MILLER

WHO IS YOUR IDEAL AUDIENCE FOR *THE AMERICAN QUEEN*?

I consider *The American Queen* a book club read. You will want to discuss this book with someone, whether it is a friend or a group of readers. *The American Queen* is also for any reader who wants to uncover hidden history. Thankfully, the book is available in paperback, hardcover, ebook and audio, so readers can enjoy this book in whichever format they prefer.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These discussion questions can also be found on pages 349 - 351 of the book.

1. When you first meet Louella, you learn that she has experienced one traumatic event after the next. Could you understand her need to fill her heart with hate rather than love while she was enslaved?
2. In chapter 4 Louella pulls away from William when he touches the scars on her back. Her scars were external, but they did something to her internally. Have you ever had to deal with internal scars that you wouldn't let anyone get close to? Have they been healed? If not, do you think talking to someone might help?
3. After emancipation, many of the formerly enslaved stayed and worked the land of the people who had enslaved them. They signed contracts that guaranteed payment, but many were not paid. This was one of the issues Louella and William dealt with after emancipation. Given what we know about the hardships for African Americans after the Civil War, do you think you would have stayed on the plantation or left the moment freedom came?
4. As the formerly enslaved people got ready to leave the Mississippi plantation, Robert Montgomery's former slaves decided to leave also. Robert was surprised by this. What do you think that says about the way Robert saw slavery?
5. While journeying from Mississippi to North Carolina, the Happy Landers slept outside and were on constant lookout for Night Riders and so-called officials who would throw them in jail and then enlist them in involuntary labor, yet they risked it all to find a place to call home. While researching these people, I found myself in awe of their grit. What about you—could you have endured everything they went through in order to build something special?
6. After losing her baby, Louella felt like "God was always making mistakes when it came to the things that mattered to her." Have you ever dealt with a situation where you thought God made a mistake with its resolution? If so, I pray that God has healed your heart and that you still believe in His goodness and His love for us.
7. The same night Louella was crowned queen, she woke to a cross burning in her yard. Sometimes it seems as if we go from the highest of highs to the lowest moments of our lives within the space of a few minutes/hours/days. I believe the low moments teach us more than the high moments. Do you agree or disagree, and why?


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS


8. Louella needed William in her life. He taught her to love and to forgive. He also made her a queen. I loved everything about King William and wished his and Louella's love could last forever. But this story is about real people and had to end as it did way back when. How did you feel when Louella discovered her love was no more?
9. Robert was a complicated man to write about. He was a slave owner who passed as white during slavery times. At his death, it was discovered that he had three children who had not lived in the Happy Land. I was challenged to find the other side of him. In reading *The American Queen*, were you able to see any good in the second king of the Happy Land? Did you come to understand him and some of his decisions?
10. In the book Louella felt as if she kept loving and losing. While researching for this book, I found myself thinking, *What a tragic life!* But the more of her story I wrote, the more I began to feel differently about loving and losing. So now I ask you: Is it better to have never loved at all, or is it better to open your heart to love, even knowing you will eventually lose that love?
11. Louella was very instrumental in the building of the Happy Land, yet there came a day when Robert took her place as second-in-command and was eventually named king, as the men were dismissive toward the queen they already had. When I read about this during my research, I became angry for her and every other woman who has had to strive to be great in this "man's world." A hundred and fifty years later it seems as if women still have the same struggles, although I think things have gotten better. Can you point to examples in this day and age where women rule and/or where we still lag behind?
12. Close to the end of the book, Louella says that God's ways are not her ways but that she finally has peace with that. However, that peace came after years of struggling against some of the things she endured. As we get older and endure our own heartache, do you think it is best to find peace with what is? If not, how would you handle the changes you must endure in life?
13. The scope of this book was so vast and the people within it so amazing that I'm sure you have other questions to add to my list. Let's open the discussion. Was there anything you found interesting about this time period or the people in this historical novel?
14. If you were queen for a day, what kind of queen would you be? Would you be more concerned with dazzling gowns or with the people you served? Name one thing you would do for others as queen of your own Happy Land.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vanessa Miller is the bestselling author of over 50 novels, with several of her books appearing on ESSENCE Magazine's Bestseller List. She's won the Best Christian Fiction Award from the African American Literary Award Show, has been a Black Expressions Book Club Alternate pick, and been #1 on BCNN/BCBC Bestseller List. Vanessa is currently published by Thomas Nelson (HarperCollins Christian Publishing) and has worked with numerous publishers previously, including Urban Christian (Kensington), Kimani (Harlequin), Abingdon Press, and Whitaker House. Most of her published novels depict characters that are lost and in need of redemption and her books have received countless favorable reviews. *The American Queen* is her first historical based on the unsung history of real people. You can find out more about Vanessa, and her books, online:

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