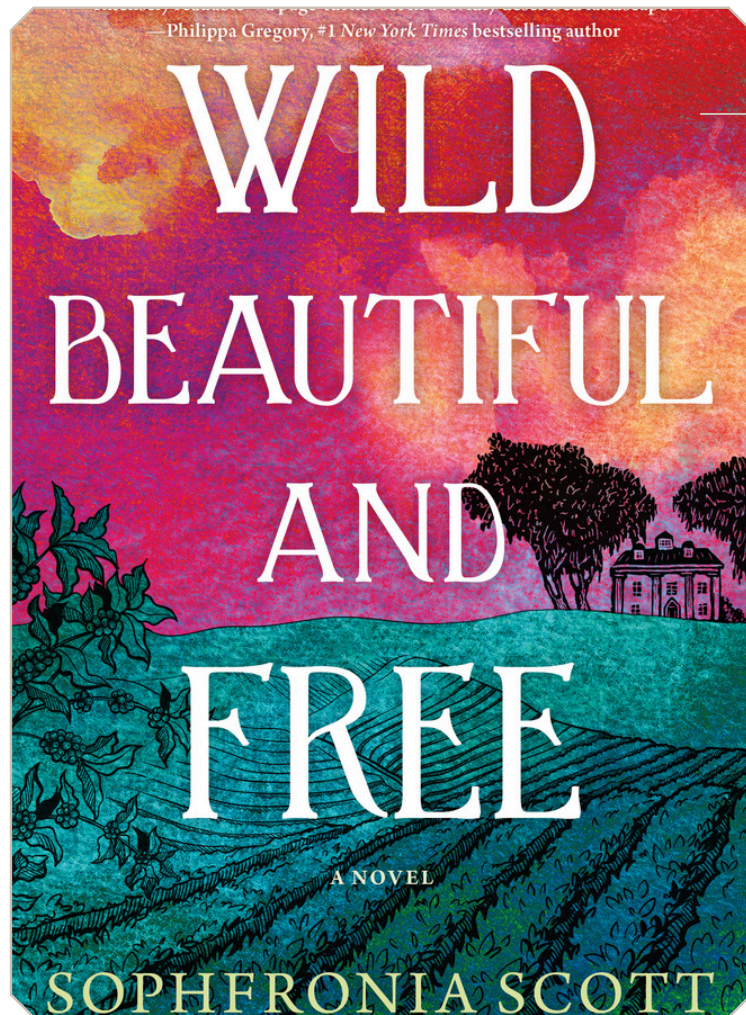


DISCUSSION GUIDE

for Book Groups

www.Sophronia.com





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophfronia Scott

Sophfronia Scott is a novelist, essayist, and leading contemplative thinker whose work has received a 2020 Artist Fellowship Grant from the Connecticut Office of the Arts. Her book *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton* won the 2021 Thomas Merton “Louie” Award from the International Thomas Merton Society. She holds a BA in English from Harvard, an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts, and is a PhD candidate at Bath Spa University in England. Her latest book is *Wild, Beautiful, and Free*, a historical novel set during the Civil War. Sophfronia’s other books include *Unforgivable Love*, *Love’s Long Line*, and *This Child of Faith: Raising a Spiritual Child in a Secular World*, co-written with her son Tain. Sophfronia is the founding director of Alma College’s MFA in Creative Writing, a low-residency graduate program based in Alma, Michigan.

THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

I'm a midwestern girl, raised in Lorain, Ohio, and lived for most of my adult life in New York City and in Connecticut. I have made my way back to the Midwest, though, because I work for Alma College in Alma, Michigan. I'm the director of the school's MFA in Creative Writing.

I've been writing since I was very young, but here's the thing: my father, a steelworker who was born in Mississippi, never learned how to read. He was a great oral storyteller, though and I think I get my sense of story from him. He spoke in stories, relating again and again different events in his life. He was also a man of his generation, which meant he wielded the belt and the switch on me and my six siblings with great frequency. It took a long time for me to understand him, and that he loved us, but before that I had a lot of anger and that young person's desire to get out of the house. I didn't know, though, what such a journey would look like.

Age 13: Enter *Jane Eyre*. I read that book and I saw the world differently. I saw possibilities. Jane taught me how to think, how to have agency in my life. She had no money and no connections at a time in England when it seemed impossible to move forward and have a life without them. Yet she did, spurred by a strong sense of self. She changed everything for me. I began thinking about what I wanted my life to be, and what steps I needed to take to get there.

THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

I decided that first step would be college and threw myself into my studies and reading even more so I could get good grades and scholarship money, which I wouldn't be able to attend without. I ended up at Harvard, met a teacher who encouraged my writing—he even said I was good enough to get paid for my work—and that led me to get hired by Time Magazine in New York City. I worked as a journalist for 15 years, moving to People Magazine after 7 years at Time. When I began exploring my own voice and thinking about what I had to say, that led me to writing books. I write both nonfiction and fiction. *Wild, Beautiful, and Free* is my third novel, but the story has been on my heart for a very long time.

I love that the publisher picked up these words from an email I sent to author Philippa Gregory, and put them on the inside cover: “When the world doesn't want you, you must learn to want yourself.”

My thoughts: I wanted Jeannette to be a big heroine with a capital H. This story is not just about a girl being sold into slavery, this is about a person who demands her humanity—who knows who she is and who fights to not only have the life that she feels she wants but to live the emotions that she feels quite deeply. Jeannette is modeled after Jane in *Jane Eyre* because of the powerful influence the book had on me. I've wondered for years what it would be like to have this powerful character be a woman of color and how, as such, she might reach so many more women.

THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

Jane is a fiery, passionate character so I knew my Jeannette would be the same. The big difference, though, is that I place Jeannette in dangerous situations that Jane would never have encountered. Jeannette has an action hero aspect where she's required to step up to protect those she loves and herself. She puts herself in harm's way and even carries a gun.

When I was thinking of setting, I wanted Jeannette to have similar, if not more, limitations imposed on her by society than what Jane experienced. I envisioned my character as a mixed-race woman, who was neither wholly black nor wholly white, who could be offered only a lonely existence because of the way she is viewed by the world. The setting that most demonstrated that, to me anyway, was Civil War-era America.

Wild, Beautiful, and Free may be a little different from the historical fiction you know. Doris Booth, who interviewed me in a video for Authorlink, was stunned but delighted by what she found in Jeannette's story. Here's the link to the video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLGWLAKeEIA>

I hope you have enjoyed following Jeannette on her journey—maybe you've even found something of your own journey in hers.

Be well,

Sophronia

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



VOICE

*Throughout the novel, Jeannette is concerned with her voice, either the way she speaks or about speaking at all. She is silenced for chapters. How is silence used as a tool of fear and repression?

*How do you think the novel works to give a voice to women like Jeannette, to push forward the conversation of identity and self esteem?

*Have you ever felt your own voice silenced in a situation, perhaps at home, at work, at school, or in social situations? What did you do about it?

*The novel is written from the first person point of view. Jeannette shares her story directly. How did you experience Jeannette's voice? Do you think the book would have had a different effect if it had another or no narrator? Why?

*How does Jeannette's voice change in different situations such as the scene where she decides to sound like Madame?

RELATIONSHIPS

*During a large portion of the book, we see Jeannette's close relationships with other women from Aunt Nancy Lynne to Dorinda to Fanny and later her fellow nurses. What does Jeannette get from these relationships? How do they sustain her? What does she learn from them?

*Silas seems to respect and admire Jeannette from their earliest meeting in Mississippi. Why doesn't she develop feelings for him? How does the change he experiences during the war affect their relationship?

*Jeannette's experience pretending to be a man was brief, but did it have any effect on how she saw herself and the limitations on the way women move through the world?

*How does Jeannette manage to develop a relationship with Christian when so many men in her life (apart from her Papa) have stood as a body of evil?

*Do you think it was truer to Jeannette's character for her to leave Christian for a time?

*How is this book different from other stories you may have read about mixed-race characters?

*What is Jeannette's connection to the soldiers she nurses? What does she get or learn from this connection?

*Was Jeannette's relationship with Christian different by the end of the book? How so? Which events in the book precipitated the change? Did the change happen for one or the other? Or both Jeannette and Christian?

*Readers have noted that they were near tears or even cried at the end of the book. If this was your experience, why do you think you felt this way?

THEMES AND HISTORY

*What do you recognize as the major themes of *Wild, Beautiful, and Free*? Where in the book do you see the themes represented?

*Would you say one of those themes is the overarching or main theme of the book? Which one and why?

*How is the book's depiction of slavery different from other narratives you may have read? What have those differences brought to the book and to your experience as a reader?

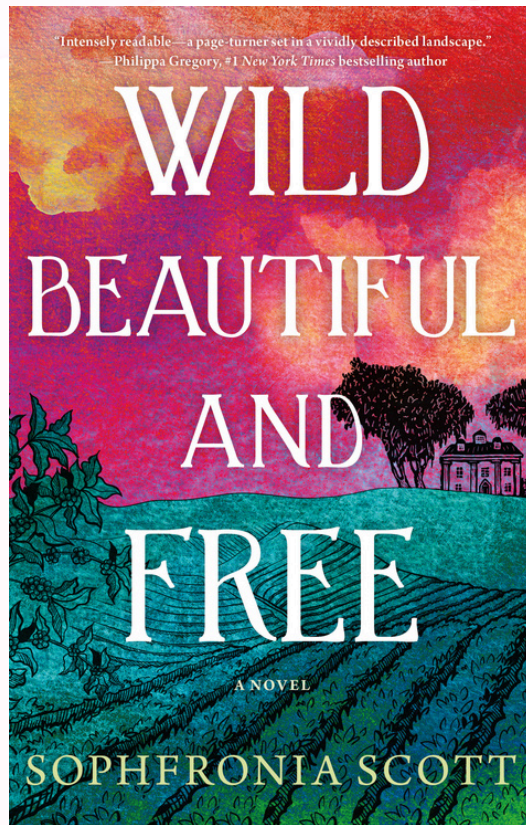
The book includes the complete text of The Emancipation Proclamation. Have you ever read it before? Did anything about the text surprise you? If so, what?

FOR FUN

*If you had to cast *Wild, Beautiful, and Free* as a film, who would you have play the characters?

*Founder is a curious, even scary, character. How would you have reacted if you had found her sitting on your bed while you were asleep?

*Have you ever found yourself comparing yourself to a presumed rival, as Jeannette compared herself to Belinda Chamberlain? Was it a helpful exercise? If not, how did you walk away from that kind of thinking? What would you say to Jeannette to advise her?



THANK YOU FOR READING!



“There is two things everybody got to find out for themselves. They got to find out about love and they got to find out about living.”

— Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*