



## ***RESOURCES -- Discussion Questions***

1. Institutional racism is a term that describes the way government and other public and private institutions systematically afford white people social, political and economic advantages while marginalizing and putting at a disadvantage African Americans and other people of color. Racial prejudice, on the other hand, is a personally held negative attitude or belief that is based on a perceived difference and generalized toward a group of people. Discuss incidents of both institutional racism and racial prejudice in the novel. How are the results of these incidents the same or different?
2. The town of Cherokee Flats is geographically segregated, with most whites on one side of the railroad tracks and all of the African Americans on the other. Nevertheless, there are many instances in the book where racial lines are blurred and/or crossed. Discuss how these instances make things better or worse for those involved, depending on the situation and whether they are white or African American.
3. Discuss Newt's fear of death, and his novel way of overcoming it.
4. Sarah Winger says, "Schoolin's more powerful than guns or money in the end..." (p. 72), and it is she who leads the protest when the school board bars the African American students from the white high school. In what ways does the novel illustrate the difficulties African Americans faced to get an education? Why do you think integrated schooling was such a contentious issue between white and black Americans?
5. How do Reverend Broadnap's religious views differ from Sarah's? What role does the church play in the community?
6. Marcus rejects the prayers of the Reverend Broadnap and the others who visit him in the reformatory, claiming that they are praying to a white God. Read the Reverend's prayer on page 95. What message does the imagery in the prayer impart?
7. Newt is initially afraid to tell what he knows about the murder because he fears that revealing the information will result in *race trouble*. Why might he feel this way? How might the murder trial have ended had Booker Savage not committed suicide?
8. Sarah Winger tells her son, "[Cherokee Flats] ain't a all-good place and it ain't a all-bad place. But you can learn just as much here about people and things as you can learn any place else...let it be your learnin' tree..." (p. 35-36). What does Newt learn in the course of the novel? How does he change?
9. After growing up in Fort Scott, Gordon Parks went on to become a well respected photographer, author, poet, filmmaker, musician and social commentator. What signs can we see in the character of Parks' alter ego, Newt, that point to a bright future? Assuming that Newt is indeed Parks, what factors or influences in his life while he was growing up allowed him to overcome his early disadvantages and succeed?
10. Although *The Learning Tree* is set in the 1920s, it was published in 1963. What might Parks' intentions have been in writing this book when he did? Did Newt's (and therefore Parks' own) childhood experiences still have relevance during the 1960s? Do they today?

**RESOURCES -- Discussion Questions, cont.**

11. Gordon Parks was an accomplished photographer who used his camera to document poverty and social injustice in the United States before and during the civil rights movement. One of his most famous portraits is of an African American woman who worked as a janitor in government buildings. Titled *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*, the woman is posed with her mop and broom in front of an American flag. Discuss the role of art, including writing, in social change.  
▶ [www.mnstories.com/archives/2006/03/gordon\\_parks.html](http://www.mnstories.com/archives/2006/03/gordon_parks.html)
12. In what ways is *The Learning Tree* a *Kansas novel*? In what ways is the story universal?
13. Classic literature is a term generally applied to written works that contain some artistic quality; enrich the human mind; have universal appeal; reveal a deep understanding of or truth about the human condition; and stand the test of time. Given this loose definition, is *The Learning Tree* a *classic*?