

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## No Telephone to Heaven by Michelle Cliff

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- Before you read *No Telephone to Heaven* how would you have described Jamaica?
  - Has your opinion changed?
  - How do the travel ads market the Caribbean to travelers?
- Was the dialect and glossary a help or hindrance to your enjoyment of the novel?
- This is considered to be an excellent example of “post colonial literature” in which natives often reject their conquerors and their culture. Do you agree?
  - Other authors of postcolonial literature/fiction: Chinua Achebe, Anita Desai, Buchi Emecheta, Amitav Ghosh, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica Kincaid, Rohinton Mistry, V.S. Naipul, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Wole Soyinka
  - Definition of post-colonial from the American Heritage Dictionary: “of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony.”
- Was Christopher’s request for a plot of land unreasonable?
  - Dispossessed versus the settler’s appropriation of land
  - He didn’t fully explain his request — didn’t put it in context as he did when explaining it to Mavis.
- Mavis — the poor — her wallet held no papers, no birth certificate, no insurance policy. How does this victim compare to the others?
- How can you explain the terrible brutality with which Christopher killed Mavis?
- What did you think of Paul’s reaction to finding the carnage at his home?
  - Never thought that Christopher may have been the culprit
  - Offered Christopher money to clean mess up...denigrating manner toward servants
  - Clueless
  - “Why don’t they love us?”
- Earlier Christopher was so frightened of the new master he “peed upon himself” rather than ask them to stop the car. Now he “pisses on their walls”.
- Is Christopher’s act a truly revolutionary gesture?
- How would you describe “Boy” Savage’s view of America?
  - Sticks to back roads to remain “invisible” self-effacing wants to “blend in”
  - Ignores the racist slogans
  - In Jamaica he had servants, in America he becomes a servant
  - Gets mad at Clare because she doesn’t weep after her mother dies, but identifies with the four girls killed in the church bombing in Atlanta
- What about Kitty’s experience in America?
  - Quick to realize they are unwelcome
  - Strives to keep her cultural traditions
  - The island is her sole point of reference
- It seems as if Kitty moves easily between patois and proper English, but Boy does not. Is it emblematic of their relationship on a greater scale, too?



**Skokie Public Library**

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- Why didn't Kitty's boss believe her when she admitted putting the subversive notes in the laundry?
- Cliff describes some habits of their Italian American neighbors who grow tomatoes and grape arbors in their backyards. After a while, Boy denied Kitty the comfort of bringing island food into their home by forbidding her to go to Bedford-Stuyvesant. What's the difference between the Italian Americans who retain some aspects of the old country and the Savages (and their cousins) who try to blend in?
- How much do immigrants adapt to the way of life or retain traditional practices in their adopted country? Does it vary from group to group? From generation to generation?
- Do you think that immigrants experience the same bigotry in America now? How much of your cultural heritage do you keep?
- Was Kitty's return to Jamaica a selfish act or an act of survival?
  - Why did she choose the child she did to take with her?
  - Jennie tells Clare that Kitty chose to leave her in the U.S. because she thought Clare would prosper there, because of her light skin color.
- What could the citrus branch that Clare's grandmother grafted to another tree symbolize?
  - P. 9: "where the grandmother had grafted the citrus...the graft remained staunch. But higher up the tree, in pursuit of the light, the fruit returned to what it was, and sweetness was caught between the bitter and the long-lived."
  - Cultural imperialism – British society onto Jamaican society
  - Boy adapting to life in America, Kitty returning to Jamaica
  - Immigrants trying to retain some of their culture/tradition after moving to another country, etc.
- Cliff describes the Savage's skin color in terms of fruit. Boy's skin tone is described as apricot; his daughters as mango and guava respectively. Kitty was just referred to as slightly darker than Boy. Mango and guava are both tropical fruit whereas an apricot is Turkish. I think it's interesting to note that their skin color was described once they were in America, not while they were living in Jamaica.
- How does the sense of place figure in this novel?
  - P. 117: "Each thing exists in place. Each thing is described by place. Would this new knowledge have pleased her mother? She (Clare) did not know."
- Clare travels from place to place: America...England...Jamaica Why?
  - Note that on p. 91 Cliff states that Clare is "longing for a tribe."
  - p. 91-93: Clare was denied the opportunity to adopt a child and wondered, while traveling as a terrorist, "Had she a child would she be on this truck? On her way to restoration?"
  - When Clare was in Jamaica (during the time of the pool party) and staying with her aunt and uncle, some orphan kids came to sing carols, eat Christmas cookies, etc. Clare was very upset by the kids, presumably because they were so light skinned. Do you think that she tried to adopt one of those kids?
- Is the racism Clare faces in England any different from that in America?
- What is the significance of Clare's discovery of the grave of Pocahontas?
  - Reminiscent of Kitty's discovery of the "faithful servant" Marcus's grave in New York
  - Didn't want to die alone in an alien land
- In England, Clare passes as white, and reads and identifies with Jane Eyre. Does she resemble the mad Bertha Rochester (Clare SAVAGE)?
- Critics see this novel as a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. If so, which characters represent the various Shakespearean characters i.e. Prospero, Caliban, Ariel & Miranda?
  - Prospero = settlers, conquerors
  - Miranda = Clare
  - Ariel = Harry/Harriet
  - Caliban = Christopher

- Frederico = Vietnam vet ? or is he a psychically maimed Caliban?
- What are some of the dichotomies depicted in this novel?
  - Parent vs child
  - Black vs. white
  - U.S. vs. Jamaica
  - Class vs class
- Was Clare “duped” into becoming a terrorist?
- What’s the significance of all the people who disappear in the novel?
  - Kitty and Jennie disappear from NY to return to Jamaica
  - Miss America disappears from the girls school, St. Catherine’s, because of her politics – trying to teach the girls about the American revolution and taking them to see an American movie
  - The Savages disappear from Jamaica, in part because of the tuition owed to St. Catherine’s that they can’t afford.
  - As a result of moving to the US, Clare disappears from St. Catherine’s also.
- “Cliff’s novel speaks in many voices – literary English, colloquial “American,” Jamaican patois” – quote from the article entitled, “After the Tempest...” Clare also can speak or read many languages: patois, American English, proper English, Greek, Latin, French, etc.