

These Walls Between Us: A Memoir of Friendship Across Race and Class

Questions for Further Reflection

- *These Walls Between Us* has three opening quotations – from Rev James Lawson, Claudia Rankine, and Mary Norman. Take a moment to re-read these quotes and to reflect on them in light of the book and/or your own experience.
- What is a passage or moment in the book that stays in your mind? What story or moment from your life does it evoke?
- What are some of the obstacles arrayed against Wendy and Mary’s becoming friends? Have you ever been in a friendship that "shouldn't" have been possible? What obstacles were there?
- What kinds of things did Wendy have to learn in order to “see Mary more fully and become a more dependable friend?” What qualities did Mary show during Wendy’s episodes of learning?
- As you consider your own cross-class, cross-race, cross-culture relationships, or other relationships where there is a power imbalance, are there dynamics that you recognize from Mary and Wendy’s evolving relationship?
- Do you have unearned privileges? If so, when did you first recognize these? What feelings have arisen during this realization and processing?
- This book is in part a grief memoir for Wendy’s mother. What other griefs does the book evoke?
- What did you learn from Mary Norman’s experiences as a worker in corrections? What does Mary’s humane approach to incarceration and rehabilitation reveal about the era of mass incarceration that began during her last years at the Correction Center?
- Alcohol was a big problem for Wendy’s parents. How did Mary and Wendy differ in their responses to the drinking, and how did this affect their relationship with each other?
- In the "Dream Wedding" chapter, Wendy airs Ta-Nehisi Coates’s observation that most white people live in a Dream that requires the exclusion of Black people like himself. Wendy writes: "To build a friendship with Mary that merited the claim of love, I would have to open my eyes to everyone's humanity, find my way to the edge of the (white) Dream, and wake up." What thoughts do you have on this Dream in your own life?
- Is there something you might do differently, or seek to change in your own life, after reading the book?
- [Especially for white readers] Wendy shows honesty and vulnerability in reflecting on her role in contributing to racism. A reader asked: “How do you think we can foster this kind of vulnerability in ourselves and others, and how do we do so without allowing conversations to center around white guilt as opposed to genuine change and reparation?” What are your thoughts?