

# UNDER THE TULIP TREE

Book Club Kit

"A tale of betrayal and redemption that will long reside in the reader's memory. I cannot recommend this novel highly enough!"

**Tamera Alexander, *USA Today* bestselling author**



# Praise for *Under the Tulip Tree*

"The kind of book you really are torn between wanting to get to the end to see what happens, and dreading the end as you want to keep reading."

**Fresh Fiction**

"A grace-filled and beautiful reminder that every story—and every person—matters."

**Heidi Chiavaroli, Carol Award-winning author of  
*Freedom's Ring* and *The Tea Chest***

"*Under the Tulip Tree* left an indelible stamp on my heart. A story of pain, forgiveness, and restoration—Frankie and Rena's story will forever remain a testament to the power of love . . . and God's peace in the midst of heartache

**Tara Johnson, author of *All Through the Night*  
and *Where Dandelions Bloom***

# About Michelle Shocklee

Michelle Shocklee is the author of several historical novels. Her work has been included in numerous Chicken Soup for the Soul books, magazines, and blogs. Married to her college sweetheart and the mother of two grown sons, she makes her home in Tennessee, not far from the historical sites she writes about. Visit her online at [michelleshocklee.com](http://michelleshocklee.com).

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*Michelle Shocklee*



# A Note from the Author

I first learned of the slave narratives, as they're called, while researching slavery in Texas. Drawn to the word-for-word and often heart-wrenching telling of life in bondage, I wanted to learn more about the narratives and how they came about.

In 1935, well into the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Federal Writers' Project as part of the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program that put out-of-work writers, librarians, teachers, and others to work. The FWP produced thousands of publications, including the more well-known American Guide series and the Life History and Folklore project. An estimated ten thousand people were employed by the FWP in the years leading up to World War II.

Beginning in 1936, employees of the FWP were sent across the South to interview people who were once enslaved prior to the Civil War. More than seventy years had passed since the war ended and these former slaves were aging. Their stories would soon be lost forever if measures were not taken to preserve them for future generations. The result was over 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery as well as 500 black-and-white photographs, all archived in the Library of Congress today. A handful of unforgettable recordings also exist, leaving the listener awed that the person speaking not only endured but survived one of the most shameful practices in history.

It was during this time of research that the story of Frankie and Rena began to emerge in my imagination. I wondered what it would've been like to sit at the feet of a former slave and hear their story unfold in their own words. As a lifelong student of history, I've come to appreciate a simple truth: Everyone has a story to tell, and no one should be silenced. The stories included in the FWP narratives are worthy of being told despite the sometimes-graphic details that are difficult to read and imagine.

Although *Under the Tulip Tree* is a work of fiction, bits and pieces of the lives of many former slaves as well as FWP writers are incorporated into the characters of Frankie and Rena. My hope is that their story of friendship, love, and forgiveness honors those whose lives now fill the pages of history.

**"A book that will really stay with you. [*Under the Tulip Tree*] is an inspiring story of incredible courage in horrific circumstances, of faith, forgiveness, redemption, love and friendship."**

Christian Novel Review

# Discussion Questions

1.) Rena Leland's life is turned upside down when the stock market crashes. What changes occur in her family after October 29, 1929? Why do you think Rena believes her father blames her for the financial crisis? Think about a time in your life when your family experienced a devastating loss. How did you cope? What, if anything, gave you hope?

2.) When Rena is presented with an opportunity to become part of the Federal Writers' Project, she wonders why the government felt it was important to preserve the stories of former slaves. How would you answer that question? What can we learn when we take the time to ask for and listen to each other's stories? What do we gain when we share our own stories?

3.) Rena's grandmother encourages Rena, who admits to feeling "stuck," to step out in faith and take the FWP job. But Rena still wonders, "How could interviewing people who'd lived in bondage decades earlier help me see my future more clearly?" What does Rena learn as she begins her new job? How does she change as a result of seeing the world with a different perspective? When have you been able to step into someone else's shoes and viewed things in a new light?

4.) As Frances Washington begins to tell her story, what surprises you about her life? What makes you sad? How realistic does her account seem?

5.) Frankie's mother has no choice but to send Frankie back into the Hall home the day after a traumatic event. Later, Frankie tells Rena that while society has improved since her childhood, "times is still hard" for Frankie, her family, and many others. In what ways has our culture grown in race relations since the Civil War? Since 1936? Where do we still fall short and what can we do to continue improving?

6.) What is Frankie's secret to survival after she is sold away from her family? What does it cost her? How would you answer the questions she and Alden have about God, including "What kind of love was it to enslave people simply because of the color of their skin?" and "What's the point of putting one's faith in something or someone who allows slavery and evil to exist?"

7.) Frankie remembers her mother encouraging her, "Ain't nuthin' you can't do if you set your mind to it." What was Lucindia hoping to instill in her children? What does Frankie eventually take away from her mother's words? When has someone spoken into your life and given you the confidence you needed to take the next step?

8.) A trip to the library to pick up *Uncle Tom's Cabin* leaves Rena meeting a sour-faced librarian who grumbles, "Literature like this only stirs up things best left in the past." Yet this was a book that President Lincoln credited with starting the Civil War. What does that say about the power of story? Consider the parables Jesus used with his disciples. Why is story valuable?

9.) Frankie initially resists getting to know Sam. Why is she so hesitant? When he tries to give her a Christmas gift, why does she run away? What is she afraid of? What changes her mind about him?

10.) While he is recovering, what does Sam ask Frankie to do that she is adamant she will not do? Why is he so insistent she help? What does Luke 6:27 say? How does Frankie respond to that biblical instruction initially? Put yourself in her shoes. How would you feel? Have you ever had an opportunity to serve your enemies in a tangible way?

11.) Jael describes an incident on a streetcar. Why do you think the conductor denies a passenger's ticket book? Why doesn't the would-be passenger accept the help of another? How do you react when you see similar instances of injustice happening today or when they happen to you? Are there times when it's more appropriate to stand up and fight or to sit back?

12.) As Frankie considers Sam's request to help in the prison hospital, what counsel does Illa give her? What transformation does Frankie need to undergo to overcome her fear and hatred?

13.) Why does Rena worry about a connection between her family and Frankie's? What does she fear? What does she learn about forgiveness? When life doesn't make sense, how do you trust in God's promise that in all things, he is working for our good?

14.) What does Frankie say about hatred? Do her thoughts line up with what you believe hatred can do to a person? Does she ever receive an apology from the people who wronged her? What does Frankie need to do to get rid of the hidden hate she is holding on to?

15.) At different points when both Rena and Frankie are confronted with difficult revelations, their initial response is to run. In what other ways do people react in the heat of the moment? How do you typically handle unpleasant news?

16.) Rena finds inspiration in the charge Harriet Beecher Stowe gives: "The time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak. . . . I hope every woman who can write will not be silent." Rena knows her articles for the FWP are "a small pebble on the path to the peaceful existence among people of different races and socioeconomic status." What pebble can you contribute?



# Q&A with Michelle Shocklee

Read this author Q&A prior to your book group meeting and then discuss with your group some questions you had about the story that you would like to ask the author.

**Q What made you want to write historical fiction? What about that genre do you enjoy?**

**A** Like my dad, I love history. I wasn't fond of the subject while in school, because it seemed to be about boring things like dates and facts (which I actually adore now). But give me a story about a real person and what their life was like way back when, and I'm hooked. As I've grown older (and wiser, I hope), I recognize how much we can learn from history. While dates and facts are important, it's the life lessons we discover from seeing people overcome challenges and hardships, about tests of faith and love, that capture me. Those are the stories I hope to tell through my books.

**Q What inspired you to write this particular story?**

**A** I discovered the slave narratives seven years ago. Reading the word-for-word interviews of former enslaved people was life-changing. When I read the narratives for the first time, I got the same feeling I had as a child listening to my grandmother, a master storyteller, spin tales of life on the farm, of losing babies because there wasn't a hospital, of living through the Great Depression. I'm awed by the courage, the will, and the perseverance it took these former slaves to make it through to the other side of the hardships they faced and be able to share their story. Their very lives are inspiration personified.

**Q** How much research did you have to do on the time period and setting for your novel?

**A** I live in the Nashville area, so research trips to historical sites were frequent as I wrote the book. Luckily, my husband makes a wonderful field trip buddy and we enjoyed many visits to Fort Negley, various Battle of Nashville sites, plantations, and cemeteries. I also read over one hundred slave narratives as well as listened to the priceless few recordings of former enslaved people sharing their stories with FWP writers.

**Q** What are the key themes in *Under the Tulip Tree*?

**A** The theme of forgiveness is a vital part of each of the main characters' stories. Togetherness is also a theme I hope comes through as Rena and Frankie get to know one another and discover that they aren't so different after all. Age, race, and circumstances separate them, but love, respect, and friendship unite them.

**Q** What is your hope for *Under the Tulip Tree*?

**A** I hope Rena and Frankie's story encourages readers to seek out people who are different from themselves and get to know their stories. Because, whether it's being lived out today or 150 years ago, everyone's story matters.

"The story of Rena Leland captured me from the first page, and I loved reading about her journey as one of the writers for Roosevelt's Federal Writers' Project."

Melanie Dobson, award-winning author of *Catching the Wind* and *Memories of Glass*

# My Book Club Notes

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