

# DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*Wench*

by

Dolen Perkins-Valdez

(New York: Armistad - 2010)

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### **Author:**

Dolen Perkins-Valdez's fiction and essays have appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, Robert Olen Butler Prize Stories 2009, *The Kenyon Review*, *PMS: PoemMemoirStory*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *Richard Wright Newsletter*. Born and raised in Memphis, a graduate of Harvard, and a former University of California postdoctoral fellow, Perkins-Valdez lives in Washington, DC. This is her first novel.

### **Summary:**

Situated in Ohio, a free territory before the Civil War, Tawawa House is an idyllic retreat for Southern white men who vacation there every summer with their enslaved black mistresses. It's their open secret. Lizzie, Reenie, and Sweet are regulars at the resort, building strong friendships over the years. But when Mawu, as fearless as she is assured, comes along and starts talking of running away, things change. To run is to leave everything behind, and for some it also means escaping from the emotional and psychological bonds that bind them to their masters. When a fire on the resort sets off a string of tragedies, the women of Tawawa House soon learn that triumph and dehumanization are inseparable and that love exists even in the most inhuman, brutal of circumstances --- all while they bear witness to the end of an era.

### **Questions:**

1. Lizzie is a house slave. How does this position differ from working in the fields? How does this status affect her day-to-day existence? What impact does it have for her children?
2. Unlike many slaves, Lizzie learned to read. Why did Drayle teach her? What does this ability offer her? Does her ability influence the other slaves she lived with?
3. When Mawu asks Lizzie about Drayle, Lizzie hears the question, "Is he good to you?" Later she comes to understand that Mawu wanted to know, "Is he God to you?" How would you answer both questions? How do these questions relate to one another in the context of Lizzie's life?
4. Lizzie claims that she loves Drayle. Does she? Does he love her? How would you describe their bond? Can love truly exist when there is such an imbalance of power between two people? What about Drayle and his wife, Fran? Talk about their

marriage and compare it to the relationship between Lizzie and Drayle.

5. How would you describe Drayle? What kind of a slave owner is he? What does Lizzie mean to Drayle? How does he treat her? How does he treat their children? Lizzie begs Drayle to free their son and daughter. Why won't he?
6. Describe the relationship between Drayle's wife, Fran, and Lizzie. How do the women view each other? How are their positions similar?
7. When Drayle receives an offer to sell Phillip he refuses. Why? What eventually makes him change his mind? What does Lizzie think about Phillip's chance at freedom? Why does she refuse to help him when she is first asked --- and what changes her mind?
8. Compare and contrast the four women at the heart of the novel: Lizzie, Mawu, Sweet, and Reenie. Though they are all slaves, are their experiences the same? What accounts for any differences?
9. How did Lizzie feel about going to Tawawa? What did the resort offer her that her life in Tennessee did not? How do her experiences at the resort change her over the course of the summers she is there?
10. What was Lizzie's opinion of Mawu when she first met her? Describe the arc of their relationship. What events changed the way they saw each other?
11. Describe the women's white masters. What are their relationships like with their slaves? Do these relationships offer any benefits to the women? Are these women entirely powerless? If not, what power do they have?
12. Why does Lizzie tell Drayle about Mawu's plan to escape? Is she surprised by Mawu's punishment? Why doesn't Mawu hate Lizzie for what she did? When Mawu finally escapes, she stays behind, waiting for Lizzie? Why does she risk herself for Lizzie? What do they all see in Lizzie --- why is she special?
13. Tawawa was very near to where free colored folk also vacationed, a place called Lewis House. What do the slaves think of Lewis House? Why didn't more slaves try to escape when freedom was so near? Why do you think the Northern whites who also summered at Tawawa didn't help them find freedom?
14. What role does the white woman, Glory, play in the novel? When they first meet her, they are startled by her behavior. "These slaves had been around Northern whites long enough to recognize one who didn't understand the rules." Why doesn't Glory seem to "understand the rules?" How does meeting her influence the slaves, especially Lizzie?

15. Many events happen during Lizzie's visits to Ohio, from the discovery of the abolitionist pamphlet to the trip to Dayton to meeting Glory and Phillip's fiancé. Talk about the significance of each and explain how they shaped Lizzie's outlook about her life and herself. How does she change by the novel's end? What about the other characters?
16. What does freedom mean to you? What does it mean to Lizzie and the other slaves?
17. Lizzie lived a life defined by indignity and degradation. How did she cope and overcome her pain?
18. After Sweet learns that all of her children have died from cholera, she tells her friends that she wants to die. Is death better than a life in chains?
19. Discuss the evils of slavery. How does it degrade the soul of both the enslaved and their masters?
20. Unlike the characters in the story, you, the reader, know that the Civil War will occur in less than a decade. How does the knowledge shape your experience reading the story? Does it give you hope for Lizzie and her children?
21. What did you learn from reading *Wench*? What affected you most about the story?