BOOK CLUB KIT

“A stunning look at what freedom really means.”
—The New York Times

LIBERTIE
A NOVEL

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Author of WE LOVE YOU, CHARLIE FREEMAN

“EPIC AND INTIMATE.”
—The New York Times
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Libertie grew out of Kaitlyn Greenidge’s research about Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward and her daughter. Although the characters take their origins from Steward and her daughter Anna, Greenidge expands deeply on the historical record. Why do you think she chose to write this as fiction rather than nonfiction? How does that affect what you take away from the novel?

2. How does Cathy Sampson’s skin color affect what she is able to do?

3. Ben Daisy tells Libertie that his girlfriend “said if she were ever free, she’d spend all day covered in silk and she’d paint her face pretty . . . She knew what she would do with freedom. It wasn’t man’s work she’d do with freedom. Not like your mama. She knew better than that.” And Emmanuel Chase also has a specific definition of freedom in relation to women. How is freedom defined in the novel by men? How is it defined by women?

4. Libertie is much darker skinned than her mother, as many people remark to each of them. How does that physical fact influence Libertie’s perspective on the world? How does it inform her choices?

5. After such a clear passion for medicine and for following her mother’s path, Libertie changes her mind and decides she does not ever want to become a doctor. Why?

6. When Cathy Sampson opens the hospital, she makes a number of compromises. How do you feel about her choices?

7. Discuss the role of the Graces. In what ways do they influence Libertie?

8. Why doesn’t Cathy want Libertie to marry Emmanuel Chase? She says to Libertie, “You chose your body over your mind.” Do you agree with her assessment of Libertie’s decision? What does she fear for her daughter?

9. Emmanuel Chase promises a new life for Libertie, but she confronts a number of secrets about his family’s history once they move to Haiti. How did you end up feeling about Emmanuel?
10. Ella and Libertie have an initially hostile relationship, but over time, their relationship deepens as Libertie comes to understand her. How did you feel about Ella? What about the garment she embroiders—what does this reveal about Ella, about history, and about who tells it?

11. There are a number of scenes depicting the beauty of living in Haiti, the scents and images of living there. At the same time, it is filled with its own secrets and limitations. How did you end up feeling about Haiti?

12. What is Ti Me’s role in the novel? What does she teach Libertie?

13. In many ways, this novel is about the relationship between mothers and their children. Discuss Cathy and Libertie’s dynamic, and what Libertie hopes for her own children. Did you feel more drawn to Cathy or to Libertie?

14. Libertie is named by her father “in honor of the bright, shining future he was sure was coming.” How do you feel about Libertie’s future by the close of the novel? How do you feel about her final choice to return to America?
Before I became a writer, I worked for many years at the Weeksville Heritage Center, which is a museum in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, dedicated to the history of the free Black community founded in central Brooklyn in 1838. Weeksville was a space explicitly dedicated to Black political power and self-sufficiency. Black landholders sold smaller lots to other Black people, hoping to give Black males enough land to qualify to vote in New York State elections and thus be able to steer the destinies of Black people in Kings County. As Weeksville expanded throughout the nineteenth century, it became a destination for people escaping slavery as well as a bedrock for a burgeoning Black middle class. Of the many accomplished people connected to the community, one was Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward.

She was the daughter of one of Weeksville’s landowners—her father, Sylvanus Smith, was a pig farmer and a relatively wealthy member of the community. She was the first Black female doctor in New York State and the third Black female doctor in the US. From 1870 to 1895, she ran her own practice in Brooklyn and co-founded the Brooklyn Women's Homeopathic Hospital and Dispensary. She sat on the board and practiced medicine at the Brooklyn Home for Aged Colored People. From 1906 she worked as a college physician at the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s Wilberforce University in Ohio. She was trained as a homeopath, in part because this newer discipline of medicine was especially accepting of women students and students of color. And most notably, her practice saw both Black and white patients.

All of this is standard talented-tenth, exceptional-Negro fare. That kind of narrative is deeply, deeply boring to me—not to mention not really helpful for liberation, which is the ultimate goal of my work. My personal aesthetic will always be in favor of the stories that are strange, that are out of character, that highlight the complexities of power, that talk about the things none of us want to talk about, that would look really jarring on a Black History daily calendar.

The thing that drew me to this particular story was the information that is not in the official biography. One of my jobs at Weeksville was to work alongside Jennifer
Scott, our director of research, on an oral history project in which we interviewed descendants of Weeksville residents. And Dr. Smith McKinney Steward’s great-granddaughter was a famous actress, Ellen Holly, who was also an excellent genealogist and keeper of her family’s history. Ellen Holly sat with us for a good portion of the afternoon to talk about her grandmother, Anna Peaches McKinney, the daughter of Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward.

What she told us was astonishing. The doctor’s daughter married a family friend, the son of another prominent Black political family, the Hollys, who had emigrated to Haiti at the start of the Civil War, certain that Black freedom was impossible on American soil. In the all-Black nation of Haiti, the Hollys hoped to establish true Black liberation. The patriarch was Bishop Holly, eventually the archbishop of Haiti in the Episcopal Church. The whole family lived in a sprawling, lush homestead in downtown Port-au-Prince, a home and city that Anna McKinney fell in love with.

She did not, however, love her husband. Reportedly, Anna knew on her wedding day that she did not want to marry him and begged her mother to let her back out of the marriage. Her mother refused. So, Anna traveled to Haiti and found the promising young Black striver she had married was in fact an abuser and a womanizer. She wrote her mother many letters from Haiti relating the deterioration of her marriage, begging to come home.

After Anna gave birth to twins, her mother made a plan to smuggle her and her children out of the country. She was able to help them escape to New Jersey, where mother, daughter, and grandchildren lived together, never returning. For the rest of her life, Anna missed Haiti but dreaded ever seeing her abusive husband again. His family repeatedly sent her letters telling her she was ruining the institution of the Black family by leaving him.

To put this into context, Sarah, her daughter, Anna, and the Holly family were all members of the burgeoning Black professional and upper class soon to be immortalized by W.E.B. Du Bois as the “talented tenth.” The ethos of this class—an adherence to respectability and a deep respect for white American and European cultural values, while simultaneously advocating for a narrative of deep Black pride and racial uplift—has dominated definitions of Blackness and discussions about how to navigate and fight racism, both in Black communities and outside our communities, for generations. What fascinates me about this class in the decades after the Civil War, especially in the period during Reconstruction, is the intense faith put in democracy, in the systems of American governance, in the really heartbreaking dream that white power brokers will
ever play fair.

As I was writing *Libertie*, I was captivated by the belief, still possible to believe in the years after the Civil War, that equality was close at hand, that it was possible, that change was coming. You’re talking about a person who had seen a three-hundred-year-old institution fall apart in less than four years, and so I was most interested in writing into that spirit of immense possibility.

I tend to approach novels as a puzzle, as a way to answer questions. For this project particularly, these are the questions that drove it, that I am still grappling with:

What does freedom actually mean?

Can we conceive of freedom without a core of domination—over other people, over the land, over groups less powerful than ourselves?

Why do we so often connect the project of Black progress and Black liberation to Black women’s bodies—whether they are pure enough, chaste enough, healthy enough, controlled enough to “deserve” or “allow for” freedom?

What does Black liberation look like when we refuse those definitions of freedom?
Libertie grew out of Kaitlyn Greenidge’s research about Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward and her daughter. Here are some basic biographical facts about McKinney Steward:

**DR. SUSAN SMITH MCKINNEY STEWARD**

(1847 – 1918) was the first Black female physician in New York State and the third in the nation. She maintained a medical practice from 1870 to 1895, specializing in prenatal care and childhood diseases, and co-founded the Brooklyn Women’s Homeopathic Hospital and Dispensary.

Her parents, Sylvanus and Anne Smith, were prosperous pig farmers and early settlers of Weeksville, a large community of free Blacks in central Brooklyn. Her brother’s death in the Civil War and the cholera epidemic of 1866 inspired her to pursue a career in medicine. She financed her medical education by giving music lessons and graduated as a valedictorian from the New York Medical College in 1870.

In addition to her impact as a medical professional, McKinney Steward was a steadfast advocate for women’s rights and racial equality, helping found the Women’s Loyal Union and serving in the Equal Suffrage League of Brooklyn. In 1911, she delivered a speech titled “Colored Women in America” at the first Universal Race Congress.

A talented musician, she was organist at the Bridge Street A.M.E. Church in Brooklyn for 28 years. She also served as an official physician at the Brooklyn Home for Aged Colored People, one of the first medical institutions in Weeksville. She was a member of the Kings County Medical Society and the Homeopathic Medical Society of the State of New York. A city park in Brooklyn is named after her.

In 1871, she married the Rev. William G. McKinney. Following McKinney’s death in 1894, she married Theophilus G. Steward, a chaplain with the 25th Infantry. She moved with him out west, living in Montana, Nebraska, and Texas before settling in 1898 at Wilberforce University in Ohio, where she served as a resident physician and taught health and nutrition until her death in 1918. Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois eulogized her.

—From the NYC Dept. of Parks & Recreation
TIMELINE OF HAITI’S EARLY HISTORY

**DECEMBER 1492** — Christopher Columbus lands on a Caribbean island that the Indigenous Tainos called Quisqueya. The Spanish enslave the Tainos and rename it Isla Española, shortened to Hispaniola.

**1697** — Spain cedes the western third of the island to France.

**JANUARY 1804** — Following a lengthy slave revolt and war of independence, the former French colony officially becomes Haiti, the world’s first Black-led republic and the second independent republic in the Americas after the US.

**APRIL 1825** — France finally recognizes Haiti’s independence but demands 90 million gold francs in compensation. The United States recognizes Haiti only in 1862.

**JANUARY 15, 1859** — Guillaume Fabre Nicolas Geffrard is elected president of Haiti. He revives policies of recruiting African Americans to settle in Haiti. In May 1861, a group of African Americans led by James Theodore Holly (whose son would marry Dr. McKinney Steward’s daughter, Anna) settles east of Croix-des-Bouquets.

**JULY 28, 1915** — The assassination of Haiti’s president prompts US President Woodrow Wilson to send US Marines to Haiti; the occupation ends in August 1934.

—Associated Press and Wikipedia