Attica Locke on
The Cutting Season

In the spring of 2004, I was invited to a wedding in Vacherie, Louisiana, about an hour or so outside New Orleans. My husband and I flew to my home state of Texas, hopped in a car with some friends and drove six hours through piney woods and deep swamps into the salty Gulf air of Southern Louisiana. We had a few wild nights in New Orleans, drinking bourbon and Hurricanes and eating fried pickles in the Quarter, slipping in and out of one blues club after another. And then that Saturday, we cleaned ourselves up, slipped into formal wear, and boarded a chartered bus that would take us and the other guests to the wedding ceremony at the Oak Alley Plantation, a scenic drive along the levees of the Mississippi. I had had, up to this point, a vague sense of the venue. I mean, I'd seen the invitation. But you have to understand that in the South people throw the word "plantation" on anything—subdivisions, restaurants, country clubs and clothing stores—and I'm not sure that before I got on that bus I had any idea that we were headed to a *plantation*. I really didn't think anything of it . . . until I saw it.

It was astonishing.

A pale, shell-pink, Greco-Revival mansion with twenty-foot columns and black shutters and a wraparound balcony, set at the end of a long alley of aged live oaks and bordered to the north by the Mississippi River, to the east and west by fields of swaying sugarcane. It was one of the most spectacular visions

I'd ever laid eyes on, and I immediately felt sick to my stomach, my insides turning over a whole cocktail of conflicting emotions: rage and revulsion over what the antebellum scene represented, but also a deep and unexpected feeling of love and filial longing, at an almost cellular level, as if I were coming face-to-face with a distant relative for the first time. When I finally set foot on the actual land, around the back side of the plantation, where the slave cabins had once stood, I burst into tears. I had, it seemed, stepped inside my own history . . . wearing a $500 dress and satin heels. It was a poignant homecoming, one in which I felt like an imposter, a woman who had wandered into the wrong century. I couldn't make sense of where I was, nor did I know what meaning to make of my presence there as a wedding guest. Was it a supreme act of disrespect, bordering on the macabre, this celebration on the bloodied grounds of a plantation? Or was the very fact of my presence there—the fact that, for one night at least, I had been invited into the big house—a sign of tremendous progress? In the twenty-first century, did the history of slavery still hold the same charge? Or were we somehow past all that?

Oak Alley is a curious place.

Sitting on twenty-plus acres along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, it is a national historical landmark, and a crown jewel in the historical tourism market in Louisiana. There are movies filmed there, Civil War re-enactments every Monday, Thursday and Friday, and guided tours daily, led by men and women in antebellum dress. There's a restaurant, a bed & breakfast, and a gift shop that sells everything from serious historical texts published out of Louisiana State University to kitschy cookbooks and mammy dolls and key chains. The plantation even bottles and sells its own mint syrup. And, of course, the manicured grounds are a

very popular spot for weddings and private events. I somehow made it through the ceremony and wedding reception back in May of 2004, slipping away from the festivities every now and then to share a smoke with the bass player in the wedding band, a black man in his mid-fifties who mused openly about whether or not he and I would be asked to wash dishes before the night was over. It was a joke that never got old and got me through the night. Later, as we boarded the bus at the end of the night, my husband and I paused over a plaque on the grounds that listed the names of every slave who had lived and cut sugarcane on that very land. Past the catered reception, the tables littered with empty bottles of champagne and leftover cake, we ran our fingers over the names, and I said a silent prayer, a note of thanks and a promise to never forget.

For me, Oak Alley was muse at first sight. I always knew that I would write about the place and its particular brand of historical tourism.

It was 2009 before I made it back there—a full year after the election that put Barack Obama in the White House, a profoundly rich time in our nation's history when it seemed we had, all of us, stepped into the unknown. Not just in terms of politics . . . but also basic psychology. Obama's presidency has necessarily interrupted a narrative about this country that had been virtually unchanged since its birth, a script about race in America that had been playing on a continuous loop for hundreds of years. And it has presented a unique emotional challenge: to hold, in both hands, the fundamental contradiction of the reality of where we've been in this country against the hope of where we're going. It made returning to the plantation all the more surreal, raising deep questions about how we treat our history in the context of tremendous progress.

It was late fall when I returned, during the sugarcane harvest,

what folks down there call "the cutting season." It had taken me nearly that long to work up the courage to stay overnight on the plantation grounds, in one of their guest cottages. I'd heard gossip about the plantation being haunted by ex-slaves, souls who walked the grounds past nightfall. I spent my first night on the screened-in porch of my rented cottage, with a bottle of wine and some cheap water crackers I'd found at the Piggly Wiggly up the highway. For hours, I sat and stared out into the foggy darkness, listening to the whoosh of cane leaves swaying in the distance, the wind almost a song, a chorus of voices calling. I wondered what I could tell them, the slaves who were long gone, if there was anything I could say to put their souls at rest, to let them know how far we'd come, that their lives and their labor had not been in vain. Sometime during that long night sitting on the front porch, the opening scenes of *The Cutting Season* came to me, twirling around my head like the wind swaying the cane in the fields. I saw the fictitious Belle Vie Plantation, modeled after Oak Alley, with its weddings and guided tours. And inside its white-washed gates, I saw Caren Gray, the plantation's general manager and caretaker. She was standing over the body of a young woman—a field worker whose throat had been slashed, her body dumped unceremoniously by the fence—having no idea how she got there or why, a twenty-first century mystery that can only be solved by Caren's willingness to delve into the plantation's past . . . and her own.

Topics for reading groups

1. The novel opens with a startling scene: "It was during the Thompson-Delacroix wedding, Caren's first day on the job, that a cottonmouth, measuring the length of a Cadillac, fell some twenty feet from a live oak on the lawn." What part does this anecdote play in the book?

2. The legacy of slavery is a major theme in *The Cutting Season*. Since the 2008 election of Barack Obama, some claim that America is a post-racial nation. Do you agree? If not, do you think it will ever be possible to overcome divisions surrounding race?

3. "Belle Vie was a cipher, really, a place in whose beauty one might find pleasure or pain, leisure or labor. People saw, in its iced columns, in the magnolias and aged oaks, what they wanted to see, what their own history told them to." What did Caren see in Belle Vie? What about her former lover, Eric, and her daughter, Morgan? What about Donovan and the Belle Vie Players? What about the plantation's owners, Raymond and Bobby Clancy?

4. Should places like Belle Vie be preserved, and if so, why? Is it better to keep reminders of slavery as a lesson for future generations? Is the beauty of such places a distraction from their true history? Does our obsession with heritage and the glamour of the past distract us from the tragedies of many people's experience?

5. What place does the plantation hold in Caren's past – and why did she return to it when she was vulnerable? How is

her life there different from her mother's and those of her ancestors?

6. What is Caren's relationship with the plantation's owners, Raymond and Bobby? She and Bobby were close as children. Why did that change?

7. The staff doesn't trust Caren because, "to them, she was management, with a capital M, the eyes and ears of Raymond Clancy. It drew a line between them, like the fence between Belle Vie and those workers in the fields. She worked in the big house now, an ascension of class and station that alienated her from everyone around her, people she worked with every day, even people whom she'd grown up with, people, who were, for all intents and purposes, family." Why doesn't Caren tell them about her childhood at Belle Vie? Would it change how they viewed her? Would it make their relationship easier?

8. Caren gets frustrated with Donovan, the young black student and Belle Vie Player who is investigated for the murder of the migrant worker. "He was a twenty-two-year-old kid, undereducated and over-entitled, of a generation long out of the shadow of the hard work that had made a life like his possible." Do you agree that Donovan is spoiled? Why might his grandmother want him to feel entitled? Is it possible to keep the ethics created by struggle and poverty alive as generations become richer or better educated? Is it desirable to do so? What does her opinion about Donovan tell us about Caren?

9. What do you think about the way the police treat Donovan? Are young men – and particularly young black men – treated with unfair suspicion the world over? Do you think the police are prejudiced, lazy or corrupt?

10. Farmers use immigrant labour for seasonal work – jobs that once were perhaps taken by locals. How has this shift affected the people in this kind of community? Are they right to be upset by these migrant workers or is their anger misplaced? Do you see any parallels between modern immigration and the exploitation of slaves in the eighteenth century?

11. How do race and immigration complicate the political ambitions of Raymond, Belle Vie's owner? Why isn't Caren more suspicious of his motives? "I know you appreciate what all the Clancys have done for you and yours", he tells her. What, exactly, have they done that Caren should be grateful for? And what do you think about the way he uses their past kindness?

12. When her mother tells her the truth about who is paying for her law school education, Caren erupts. "It was no way to start what she considered a new life, one freed from the burdens of a legacy she never asked for, freed from the confines of a world that always put people like the Clancys on top." Is Caren right to be upset?

13. Caren tells Eric, "The Clancys have always been big on 'negro education.'" What is the significance of her comment? Do privileged Southern whites like the Clancys owe a debt? Is it truly generosity or a form of unconscious condescension? In what ways are we responsible for crimes committed by our ancestors? How long does the legacy of privilege last?

14. Eric does not want Morgan involved with the investigation of the murder. Is he right or wrong in keeping her away from the police? By not getting involved is he corroding the

justice system, of which he is a part? As a non-Southern man, can Eric truly understand Caren's connections to the past? "You're better than this place, Caren", he tells her. Is he right or are his feelings coloring his judgment?

15. Contrast Eric's comments with those of Ginny, the church secretary who helps migrant workers. When she learns Caren's family has been tied to Belle Vie for generations, she tells her, "It's beautiful country out there, just outrageously beautiful. You should be really proud." Does Caren have reason to be proud of the past and her ancestors, despite the pain of their lives?

16. How does Caren's view of Belle Vie shift over the course of the novel? And how does that relate to her feelings about her own life?

17. What do you think should happen to Belle Vie?