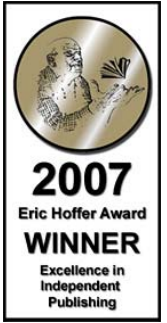


Study Guide for *To Love Mercy*



This novel tells a tale of blacks and whites, Christians and Jews, how children view the world, conflict and forgiveness ... and Chicago in 1948 ... through the eyes of two boys – Steve Feinberg, 10, white and Jewish, from the prosperous Hyde Park neighborhood, and Jesse Owens “Sass” Trimble, 11, a black street kid from Bronzeville and son of a Evangelical Christian preacher. A third narrator is Dora Barfield, an elderly black woman born in Mississippi who is the Feinberg family housekeeper and also belongs to Sass’s father’s storefront church.

Although the novel is set more than half a century ago, it raises questions about race, religion and class that are with us today. Its themes are subtle but its language is simple, with a “Fog Index” at fourth-grade level. This novel is recommended for Grades 7 through adult, and is particularly appropriate for high school classes in English Language Arts; Honors English; Multicultural Literature; Social Studies/Social Sciences; American History; Chicago History; Race Relations/Black Studies; Comparative Religion; and student book clubs.

The year is 1948, the city is Chicago. Imagine you’ve gone back in time and now you’re in The Loop, walking up State Street. The first thing you notice is the streetcars.

The cars clank, they grind, they cry out as steel scrapes against steel. When it rains, the tracks get “greasy,” causing automobiles to slip and slide. But chances are your family doesn’t even own a car. Chances are your family rides the bus, the El ... or the streetcar.



A “red devil” streetcar from the ‘40s. The city replaced “red devils” with “green hornets” in the early ‘50s.

This is a big day, a parade day. Crowds line State Street. The cops keeping order are on horseback. That doesn’t surprise you. The milk wagon that comes through your alley at 6 o’clock every morning is drawn by a dapple-gray horse named Mike. The milkman trudges up two flights of stairs to your apartment, carrying your mom’s order



Mounted police on parade crowd control

of gallon glass bottles. He leaves her order by the back door and collects the empties. When Mom opens a bottle, she usually lets you skim off the cream that floats on top.

You take the Jackson Park El home from the parade. It goes to Sixty-Third and Stony Island where you transfer to a bus home. Carfare is twenty cents for grownups, a dime for kids, and the transfer is free. As you get off, Charley, the cop who walks the beat in the neighborhood, tips his hat and greets you.



Gathering around the radio

At home you turn on the radio just in time to hear *Captain Midnight*. You've been planning to send in for your own Captain Midnight Secret Decoder Ring - two Wheaties boxtops plus twenty-five cents to Box 200, New York New York - so you listen closely for the commercial. After dinner, the family gathers around the big radio in the living room and listens to Lux Radio Theater, followed by Your Hit Parade. Tonight's special guest is Peggy Lee, singing the big hit tune of 1948, *Mañana*.

In the Chicago of 1948, the snow is always dirty because furnaces burn coal. There are no computers, no GameBoys, no iPods. Television exists but no one you know has a set; that will come next year. There is no hip-hop, no disco, no rock 'n' roll, no air conditioning (except in movie theaters), no credit cards, no ZIP Codes, no Nikes. No pro soccer, no

ultimate fighting, no league divisions: The White Sox are in the American League, the Cubs in the National League and that's that. NASCAR is just being born.

There are telephones though - black ones, with dials. You need an operator to call long distance, and the call may cost more than a buck a minute. Your family has one phone. Some families have none.



A dial phone from the '50s

Were the kids of 1948 Chicago unhappy without all that stuff? Probably not. They played Keep-Away and Kick-the-Can and

Running Bases, and a uniquely Chicago game called Penner which requires nothing more than a rubber ball and a brick wall of the proper kind. Kids probably did spend more time outdoors in 1948.



The Jackson Park El station at 63rd Street; the Jackson Park line was closed and the El tracks torn down during the '80s and '90s.

One thing those 1948 kids had a lot more of, was freedom. Parents didn't worry much about abductions or child molesters. They just told kids to go outside and play, be back in time for dinner. So it's not hard to imagine that two young boys might meet by chance ... might jump on the wrong bus and find themselves out at Midway Airport before they knew it ... might get on another wrong bus and land at the big open-air flea

market known as Maxwell Street, where hot dogs lead to a discussion about religion ... might try to find their way home yet again on the El, but again catch the wrong train and wind up at Riverview, "The World's Largest Amusement Park," way out on the North Side, miles and miles from home.

One of these boys, Steve Feinberg, is 10 years old, white, Jewish, from the relatively affluent



The open-air sidewalk hot-dog stand at Maxwell Street

neighborhood of Hyde Park. The other is Jesse Owens Trimble, 11, son of a storefront Christian preacher. Jesse – nicknamed “Sass” because of his smart mouth – lives in Bronzeville, the black neighborhood that stretched along State Street from about 29th to about 63rd. Nearly every African-American in Chicago in 1948 lived squeezed into that narrow three-mile strip of the South Side. Segregated housing may have been against the law, but in Chicago it was alive and well.

Two boys who live less than 30 blocks from each other, but they might as well be from different planets. One is white and the other black, one a Jew and the other a Christian, one well-to-do and one just scraping by. How might they ever understand one another?

So much has changed since 1948. The streetcars are gone. Urban renewal nearly destroyed Bronzeville in the ‘50s and ‘60s; only recently have there been efforts to rebuild and revive it – as a well-to-do enclave. The Jackson Park El was torn down in the ‘80s and ‘90s. It’s half a century since cops walked beats on foot. You



Aladdin's Castle, the funhouse at Riverview



Kids playing baseball, Bronzeville ca. 1948

can still buy Wheaties and the milk to pour on it, but milkmen and their horses are long gone, along with glass milk bottles. As for Captain Midnight, he is a fading memory.

What about relations between the races? African-Americans can live wherever they want now, get any job they like ... right? They all have white friends, and whites all have black friends ... right? Yes, in many ways the world has changed so much since 1948 it would be unrecognizable today. But in other ways, the world has not changed much at all.

Chapter I, pp. 1-8: *Tuesday, June 15, 1948*

1. There is no introduction, just a narrator who begins speaking. The narrator is not identified but gives you clues about him/herself. Is the narrator:

- A boy or a girl?
- A child or an adult?
- White or black?

- Christian or Jew?
 - Where is he/she located?
2. What is the narrator's name? Is it a real name or a nickname? How do you know?
 3. You know from the chapter title that the year is 1948. Name as many things as you can that are no longer part of today's world.
 4. The author "breaks the rules" by skipping quotation-marks and commas. Also, he writes in the present tense, which is unusual though it may not break the rules. Do you think the author is doing these things on purpose? How does this writing style affect the way you read this story?

Chapter II, pp. 9-21: *Got a Dime?*

1. Again there is no introduction, just a narrator who begins speaking.
 - Is it the same narrator?
 - If not, who is this narrator?
 - Is this narrator a boy or a girl?
 - A child or an adult?
 - White or black?
 - Christian or Jew?
 - Where is he/she located?
2. Some events in Chapter I and Chapter II are the same but seem different. Why?
3. This narrator talks about brand names that have disappeared and uses old-fashioned slang, but here too you get clues to their meaning. Without looking them up, can you tell:
 - Who was Bob Elson?
 - Who was Tony Lupien?
 - Who was Friendly Bob Adams?
 - What is reefer?
 - What is the Bridewell?
4. What is this narrator's name? Nickname? How did the narrator get the nickname?
5. This narrator talks in a different style than the first narrator. We use the term "voice" to refer to such style differences. Identify as many things as you can that distinguish this narrator's "voice" from the first narrator's "voice."
6. This narrator has a dream. What does the dream tell you about the narrator's religion?
7. This narrator is visited in the hospital by the first narrator. Is this visit welcome or unwelcome? Why?

Chapter III, pp. 22-31: *These People*

1. The first narrator is speaking again. Now we know he is Steve, the white Jewish boy from Hyde Park. Beside Sass, how many other African-American boys do you think Steve knows?
2. Does Steve like or dislike African-Americans? Discuss.
3. Does Steve's grandfather Nate like or dislike African-Americans? Discuss.
4. Why is this chapter titled *These People*?
5. Who was Chuck Yeager?

Chapter IV, pp. 32-37: *What Salt Is*

1. Steve misunderstands much of what adults say and do. Here, he hears adults use a word he thinks is "salt." What do you think the actual word is? What does it mean as used here?
2. When Steve comes home from the police station, his parents try to comfort him but he starts crying. Why does he react with tears?
3. Steve gets irritated with his friend Rickie. Why?

Chapter V, pp. 38-52: *Mercy Hospital*

1. What is the "ticket to Mars"?
2. Steve refers to things and places that have disappeared since 1948. Name as many as you can.
3. These days, the polite term for black persons is "African-American." What was the polite term in 1948? How can you tell that it was the polite term – what clues are there in this story?
4. Steve asks the woman on the bus whether she is a nurse at Mercy Hospital. She says no, she "just sweeps and cleans." Do you think there were any African-American nurses at Mercy Hospital in 1948? Do you think there were any African-American doctors? Discuss.
5. Grandfather Nate speaks English and a second language. What is his second language?
6. Steve and Sass have their first long conversation in this chapter. For the most part, the text does not indicate which of them is speaking. What clues help you tell the speakers apart?
7. Steve offers to go to Sass's home and tell his parents he is in the hospital. Sass says he believes Steve is crazy. Why does Sass say that?

Chapter 6, pp. 53-68: *Dora on the Bus*

1. A new narrator appears. Who do you think this narrator is? How can you tell?

2. Is this narrator:

- A boy or a girl?
- A child or an adult?
- White or black?
- Christian or Jew?
- Where is he/she located?

3. Most of this chapter is set in italic type. What do these italics signify?

4. This narrator tells a story about something that happened a long time ago in Mississippi. Does this narrator know what really happened? Do you? Discuss.

5. The Mississippi story includes a girl named Rusty. “She was a pretty thing though I hate to say it,” the narrator recalls. Why does the narrator describe Rusty as pretty, and why does the narrator “hate to say it”?

6. In 1948, could an African-American get a fair trial in Mississippi? In Chicago?

7. In the Bible, Israel is the land God promised the Jews. The narrator says “Promised Land” to refer to another place. What place is that? Why does the narrator call it the “Promised Land”?

Chapter 5, pp. 69-83: *Steve and Dora*

1. Steve lies to his parents about visiting Sass in the hospital. Do you think Steve has ever lied to them before? What does it tell you about Steve that he lies to them now?

2. How does Steve feel about Dora? How does Dora feel about Steve? In your life, do you know of similar relationships?

3. Steve asks Dora to help him contact Sass again. How does Dora react? If you were Dora, how would you react?

4. A Philco takes a half-minute to warm up. What is a Philco? Why does it need to warm up?

Chapter 6, pp. 84-96: *Jesse Owens Trimble*

1. Sass lies to his parents and the policeman about the events in the parking lot. Do you think Sass has ever lied to them before? What does it tell you about Sass that he is lying to them now?

2. Sass’s parents lie to the policeman too. Why is Sass surprised?

3. What are spats? If you don’t know, look it up.

Chapter 7, pp. 97-98: *Joseph and the Ant*

1. Another new narrator appears. Is this narrator:

- A boy or a girl?
- A child or an adult?
- White or black?
- Christian or Jew?
- Where is he/she located?

2. Why is this chapter set entirely in italic type?

3. Who was Haile Selassie? If you don't know, look it up.

Chapter 10, pp. 99-115: *To Do Justice*

1. What is the relationship between the title of this chapter, *To Do Justice*, and the title of this novel, *To Love Mercy*?

2. How could a fire start in the projection booth of a movie theater? What would happen if it did?

3. Earlier you were asked if Grandfather Nate likes or dislikes African-Americans. Now that you've seen more of Nate, would you change your answer? In what ways?

4. Does Steve's mother Jean like or dislike African-Americans?

Chapter 11, pp. 116-126: *Talking to Jesus*

1. Why is this chapter titled *Talking to Jesus*?

2. How does Dora feel about Steve's mother Jean?

3. How does Dora feel about Sass's father James? About Sass?

4. This chapter is set mostly in italics. Why are some portions set in regular ("roman") type?

5. At the end of this chapter, Dora is confused and anxious. To whom does she turn for help?

Chapter 12, pp. 127-132: *Steve and Sass*

1. At the start of this novel, the black and white characters seemed to live in separate worlds; now they discover hidden connections. You probably know people you think live in different worlds than yours. How might you have hidden connections to such people?

2. Why does Steve think the Ten Commandments were originally written in Hebrew? Why does Sass think they were originally written in English? Is either right? If you don't know, look it up.

Chapter 13, pp. 133-134: *The Emperor*

1. The narrator from Chapter 7 returns. He still doesn't identify himself. Who do you think he is?
2. This narrator often talks in rhymes. Why?
3. Who was the Emperor Ras Tafari? What country did he rule? Where is that country located? If you don't know, look it up.

Chapter 14, pp. 135-145: *White Sox vs. Senators*

1. What is on the other side of Wentworth Avenue and why is Sass forbidden to cross it?
2. Sass has never been to downtown Chicago and he doesn't know what toy electric trains are. Steve has been told it's not safe to walk in Bronzeville or stay out without telling his family where he is. If Steve and Sass were on *Survivor*, which would be kicked off the island first?
3. Midway Airport, on Chicago's Southwest Side, was renamed in honor of the World War II Battle of Midway in 1949. What was this airport called in 1948, before it was renamed?

Chapter 15, pp. 146-161: *Maxwell Street*

1. In this chapter, what do you think Sass, a Christian, learns about Judaism?
2. In this chapter, what do you think Steve, a Jew, learns about Christianity?
3. The man in the clothing store acts abusive toward Steve, but Steve accepts the abuse rather than fighting back. Why?
4. What is a "sheeny"? If you don't know, look it up

Chapter 16, pp. 162-171: *The El*

1. Sass says people dance in his church when the Holy Spirit enters them. Steve says no one ever dances in his synagogue. "Heck ... that's why you haven't heard of the Holy Spirit," Sass replies. "He must not come to no Jew church." Discuss.
2. There is a parade every year in Bronzeville. What is it called?
3. You need two things to play Penner. What are they?

Chapter 17, pp. 172-174: *The Lion of Judah*

1. The narrator from Chapter 7 and Chapter 13 returns. He says he is the Emperor Haile Selassie, Son of Jah. Who is he actually?
2. He says others call him "Crazy Joe." What has he experienced to drive him crazy?

Chapter 18, pp. 175-184: *Duane, Ned and Joey Bob*

1. How do Steve and Sass discover they are on the wrong El train?
2. Steve is embarrassed to explain why he is paying Sass's admission to Riverview. Why?

Chapter 19, pp. 185-196: *Praying for Guidance*

1. Dora reveals what she knows to Steve's parents and expects to be fired. Why isn't she?
2. Before she tells Sass's parents what she knows, she tries to find Sass herself. How?

Chapter 20, pp. 197-225: *Riverview Park*

1. After Steve loses their money, he and Sass can't get home unless Sass does something degrading and humiliating. What does Sass do?
2. Steve does something that humiliates Sass further. What does Steve do? Why?
3. Then Steve and Sass get into a fistfight and Steve calls Sass hateful names. Do you think Steve fully understands what he is doing and why? Do you understand it? Discuss.
4. If you were Sass, would you forgive Steve?
5. Who was John D. Rockefeller?

Chapter 21, pp. 226-231: *The Calumet*

1. The title of this novel is *To Love Mercy*. In this chapter, one character shows great mercy to another character. Who shows mercy to whom, and what does he do? What would you do?
2. Steve exclaims how small Sass's apartment is. Sass disagrees. Why?
3. What fuel is used to heat Sass's apartment? Does anyone you know use this fuel at home?

Chapter 22, pp. 232-239: *King of the Ethiopian Hebrews*

1. How old was Joseph when he went to prison? How old is he when he is released?
2. How does Joseph get from Mississippi to Chicago?
3. What happened in Paducah? Where is Paducah? If you don't know, look it up.
4. At the end of this chapter, someone gives Joseph a hug. Who? Does Joseph know who it is?

Chapter 23, pp. 239-251: *To Love Mercy*

- 1 Why does the author use four narrators to tell this story? Could he have told it with three? Two? Just one? If you had to pick just one narrator, which would you pick? Why?
2. Anti-Semites falsely accuse the Jews of killing Christ. During their argument, James makes that accusation against Nate. What does James actually say to Nate? What is James referring to?
3. Nate replies, "Jews are the best friend the colored man's got." What is Nate referring to?
4. Steve asks if Sass would rather be white. What does Sass say and why does he say it?
5. Sass asks if Steve would rather be Christian. What does Steve say and why does he say it?
6. What is the "Bob Hope Diamond"? Who was Bob Hope? If you don't know, look it up.
7. Why do you think this novel is called *To Love Mercy*?

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Author Biography

Frank Joseph, the author of *TO LOVE MERCY*, was born and raised in Kenwood and Hyde Park. He was graduated from Kenwood School, then an elementary school at 50th and Blackstone, now the site of Kenwood Academy High School. He would have attended then-Hyde Park High School (now Hyde Park Academy High School) but his family moved to Park Forest during the "white flight" of the mid '50s that transformed the Hyde Park neighborhood from almost all white to majority black in just a few years. The impact of this transformation provides the story line for *To Walk Humbly*, a novel-in-progress that is the sequel to *To Love Mercy*.

After high school at Rich Township (now Rich East), Frank was graduated from Northwestern University as a creative writing major. He took his first job as a cub reporter with the City News Bureau of Chicago, a fabled training-ground for journalists for 109 years, until it closed its doors forever in 2005. At "City News," Frank chased fires and hung out in police stations, learning the craft and art of journalism in a place where you were expected to do whatever it took to get the story, and the motto was: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." (For a brief history of City News, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_News_Bureau_of_Chicago.)

Following his City News tour, Frank was hired into the Chicago bureau of The Associated Press, the worldwide cooperative wire service. (A brief history of "The AP" is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associated_press.) It was the mid '60s, the most turbulent time in Chicago since the Roaring '20s. As the nation wrestled with the Vietnam War and the youth and civil rights revolutions, Chicago was being wracked with neighborhood riots. The first, known as the "fire hydrant riot," broke out in a poor black neighborhood at 12th and Taylor after residents opened a fire hydrant so kids could cool off in the broiling summer heat. Cops and firemen swooped in in a massive show of force and ... turned off the hydrant. The riot that broke out in response lasted three nights, with looting and property damage that devastated the Roosevelt

Road shopping district.

The "fire hydrant riot" provides the story line for *To Walk Humbly*, the projected third novel in Frank's "Chicago trilogy." Frank covered that riot and dozens of others that followed, including the Detroit Riot -- the costliest in our history, in both loss of life and property damage -- and the notorious Democratic National Convention disorders of 1968.

The neighborhood riots occurred in a mid-century Chicago that sociologists have termed the most residentially segregated city in America North or South. They shook Frank's view of relations between the races and planted the seeds for his series of novels of Chicago. But the first seeds were planted much earlier, when he was a kid going to White Sox games with his father, Irwin Joseph (the model for "Charles" in *To Love Mercy*), and Nathan Joseph (the model for "Nate" in *To Love Mercy*).

Like the fictional Nate, the real-life Nathan Joseph owned and ran a movie theater at 35th and State from the silent-movie days until the theater closed, the victim of a massive misguided urban renewal project that virtually destroyed Bronzeville, "Chicago's Harlem," and led to the construction of notorious high-rise public housing projects including the Robert Taylor Homes and the Stateway Gardens. Like the fictional "Calumet Theater" in *To Love Mercy*, Nathan Joseph's real-life theater (called the States Theater) catered to an audience that was mostly poor and almost entirely black, with a new double-feature every day, seven days a week. And like the fictional "Steve" in *To Love Mercy*, the young Frank Joseph couldn't help notice how whites said one thing about blacks but often did another; and how whites and blacks often experienced the same events completely differently. By using the white kid "Steve" and the black kid "Sass" as separate narrators in *To Love Mercy*, Frank seeks to portray these different worldviews through the eyes of two Chicago kids from wildly different backgrounds ... who meet by chance, but over the course of a long day and night discover the hidden bonds they share.

For Further Research

Here are three excellent websites for further research into Chicago history:

- www.chicagohistory.com, the website of the Encyclopedia of Chicago -- the best and most comprehensive overview of Chicago history available
- www.jazzagechicago.com, a marvelous guide to historical Chicago with an emphasis on popular culture
- www.chicagology.com, an excellent supplementary website on Chicago history

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