

Discussion Questions

1. In chapter one, the author describes his alter ego, Oscar, as lazy and work-shirking. Assuming that this is a somewhat accurate description of the real Oscar Micheaux as a young man, doesn't it seem odd that he would grow up to be so enterprising, creative, and professionally successful? What do you think changed?
2. In chapter two, as Oscar is about to travel off to Chicago, his sister tells him to "be good and try to make a man of yourself." How would you describe the challenges he faced as an African American of that place and time to become a man, and how well do you think he succeeded in responding to those challenges?
3. The author divides members of his own race into two categories: "progressives" like himself, who follow the principles of Booker T. Washington and try to better themselves through industry and application without being hamstrung by white racial prejudice, and "reactionaries" like Rev. McCraline, who complain bitterly about discrimination and prejudice and demand equal rights, but who do little actively to take advantage of the opportunities that are available to them. Although not mentioning him by name, Micheaux takes a pot shot at W.E.B. DuBois (identified in chapter 37 as a "professor in a colored university in Georgia"), who was Washington's chief antagonist in the debate among turn-of-the-century African American leaders about which strategies to follow to better their race. Discuss the validity of Micheaux's approach and what you think may have motivated it.
4. In addition to his often acerbic remarks about his own race (as well as about American Indians), Micheaux harbored some deep animosities toward urban America. What evidence do you find of this? Why do you think rural homesteading in the "Great Northwest" was so appealing to him? Do you think his admonitions to his fellow blacks to take up homesteading were realistic?
5. Micheaux's description of the homesteading process highlights the opportunities it afforded, as well as its limitations and threats to economic security. Discuss.
6. Anyone who has read about early town history in the region will recognize many of the things the author discusses in describing early-day town rivalry and development. What were some of the standard elements of that narrative?
7. Describe the relationship between the protagonist and his father-in-law. Reading between the lines, do you accept Micheaux's description of Rev. McCraline as one that is rational and accurate? What do Micheaux's self-described words and actions in these episodes tell you about him as a person?

8. What is your overall evaluation of the book as history, literature, insight into human nature and behavior, and description of landscape?

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