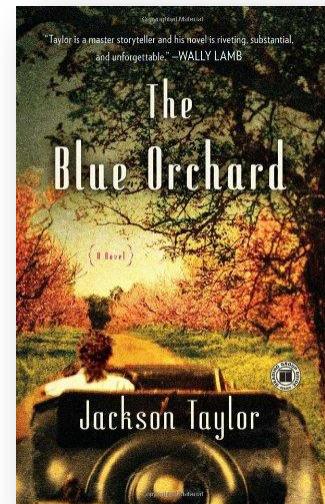**NCJW®**

National Council of Jewish Women

Book Club Discussion: The Blue Orchard

Books can offer a good basis for discussion and further understanding of important subjects, and book clubs can be a great method for NCJW members and supporters to get more involved and active. Reading a book that raises issues about birth control, abortion, or other topics impacting a person's health, well-being, and autonomy is an excellent way to raise awareness about NCJW's reproductive justice initiative and how NCJW members can help advance its goals.

The Blue Orchard, by Jackson Taylor

In 1973, the US Supreme Court ruled in the historic case *Roe v Wade*, legalizing abortion throughout the country and affirming every woman's right to make her own faith-informed decision about ending a pregnancy. Taylor's novel, *The Blue Orchard,* takes us back to a time before that landmark case, vividly illustrating one woman's view and personal experiences with abortion prior to its legality. Spanning the Great Depression through the early 1950's, readers enter the world of Verna Krone, the daughter of low-income Irish immigrants who is forced to leave school to help support her family. After surviving sexual assault and other blatant forms of exploitation in her early life, Verna eventually becomes a nurse. She then makes a decision that changes her life forever: helping a wealthy, black doctor to provide then-illegal abortion care. This story is based on the life of the author's own grandmother.
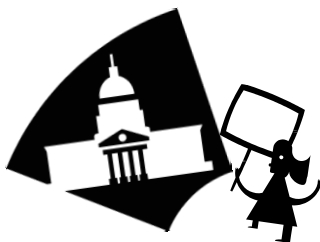
Preparation for the Book Club Gathering:

▶ Remind participants to be prepared to discuss how the book relates to NCJW's mission.

▶ Encourage participants to review NCJW Reproductive Justice Initiative resources at my.ncjw.org/reproductivejustice, specifically *The Basics: NCJW and Reproductive Justice.* It may also be useful to have printed copies of this resource at the meeting; confirm who can bring them.

▶ Encourage participants to look into the current status of access to affordable reproductive health care and/or income equality among different populations in your community.

▶ Confirm location and decide who is bringing snacks and beverages.

Discussion Questions and Context to Consider:

Consider framing your book club discussion in the context of reproductive justice. In addition to the questions found at the back of the book, here are some comments and a few other questions to discuss.

Today, politicians continue to threaten and chip away at reproductive rights, seeking to make it harder for a woman to obtain abortion with restrictions such as medically unnecessary waiting periods, onerous clinic regulations, and discriminatory limits on insurance coverage. At the same time, they attack access to preventive care like birth control coverage, and refuse to broaden access to other basic services by blocking expansion of state Medicaid programs.

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Discussion Questions continued:

Such restrictions impede reproductive justice, a framework, movement, and vision developed by women of color that moves beyond the legal right to access key health services, to a broader social justice and human rights framework that provides autonomy and health equity for all people. *(For more information, see NCJW Reproductive Justice Initiative toolkit resource at my.ncjw.org/reproductivejustice.)*

▶ NCJW believes reproductive freedom and religious freedom are fundamentally linked. That is, every woman must have the ability to make her own decision about abortion according to her own religious or moral beliefs. On page 163, Verna reflects on her own moral views about abortion after deciding to provide post-abortion care, and turns to a place of faith. Do Verna's thoughts on religion and reproductive rights relate to what you see happening in your community today? Do they resonate with you as an NCJW advocate?

▶ This book was based on the life of the author's grandmother, elevating a personal story. How can you use personal stories, as well as information on health disparities and our Jewish values, to inform your current or future work to advance the goals of reproductive justice today?

▶ The many factors, identities, and systems of oppression that impact a person's ability to make their own decisions about their body, family, and reproductive future are often called "intersectional," as they are interconnected. For example, income inequality combines with sexism in many women's lives in ways that impede economic security. How do intersectional reproductive justice issues (such as income inequality or racial discrimination, or factors like geography or educational opportunities, etc.) come through in Verna's own experiences? How are they experienced by other characters in the book?

▶ The goals of reproductive justice include achieving each person's human right to bodily autonomy; to have or not have children; to birth and/or parent their children with dignity; and live and/or raise a family in a safe, healthy environment. Who in the book is able to realize any or all of these rights? Whose rights are impeded and how?

> *Fact:* In the US, *1 in 3* women will have an abortion in her lifetime, and *6 in 10* of women who have an abortion are already parents.
>
> *Source: Guttmacher Institute, www.guttmacher.org*

▶ Today, some politicians and conservative religious leaders seek to impose restrictions on abortion that perpetuate cultural stigma around abortion, shaming women who seek the procedure. Discuss how this culture of judgment played out in the book, and if it resonates with your experiences or observations of contemporary society.

▶ By page 156, Verna agrees to join Dora in providing post-abortion care, realizing the inequity in access to care between affluent and low-income women. How does Verna's realization relate to women's disparate access and circumstances today? What has/hasn't changed since *Roe* legalized access to abortion throughout the United States?

If you or your NCJW section have other book club ideas related to reproductive justice, or are planning other reproductive justice programming or advocacy, please let us know!
Contact Leanne Gale, Leanne@ncjwdc.org.