A READER'S GUIDE

ON FREE GROUND

Book Club Discussion Guide

Two boys grow up together in a world that insists one must own the other. As friendship becomes love, they discover that freedom is far more complicated than crossing a boundary between slave and free.

A NOVEL BY

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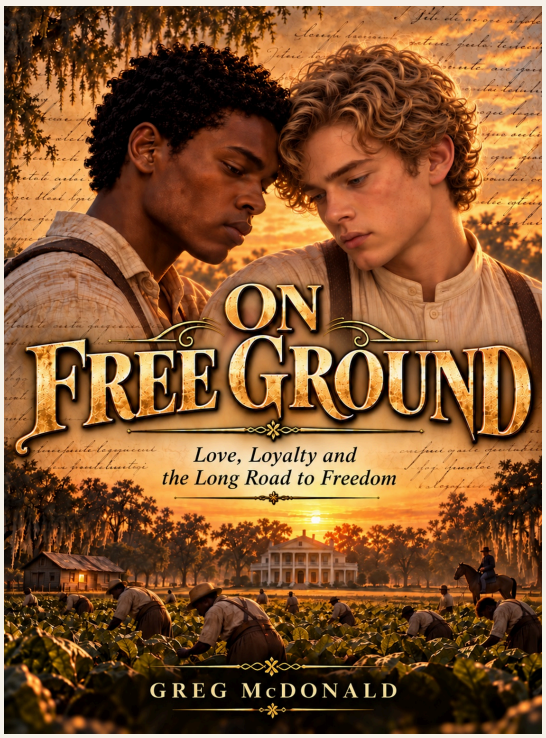
FOR READING GROUPS

Welcome to the Guide

A note for readers and discussion leaders

NORTH CAROLINA, 1839.



On Free Ground is a story about slavery and freedom, but also about literacy, education, race, sexuality, power, family, and the human need to determine the course of one's own life.

This guide is meant to help your group get the most from the novel. It opens with a synopsis and a cast of principal characters, then offers a tour of the real history the story is built on, before turning to questions for discussion. Groups with limited time may wish to choose a handful of questions rather than working through every one. A closing exercise suggests a way to end your meeting.

A word of caution: the synopsis carries the story through Isaac's manumission and some of the questions discuss events well into the book. It stops short of the final chapters. If your group prefers to come to the novel fresh, we suggest reading it before opening this guide.

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SYNOPSIS

I. The Story in Brief

A synopsis, stopping short of the final chapters

The novel opens on a North Carolina tobacco plantation called Bellwether, on the night Sarah Gatlin dies in childbirth and the second baby is lost with her. William Gatlin, planter and tobacco merchant, hands his four-year-old son Liam to Lily, the enslaved woman who runs his household and who has a six-year-old son of her own. From that night the two boys are raised in the same rooms by the same woman. One of them is her child. The other is her charge. Only one of them is owned, and for a few years neither is old enough to know which difference is the one that matters.

In 1846 William hires a tutor, Thomas Shackelford, a young graduate of the College of William & Mary and a Quaker who keeps his abolitionism to himself for the sake of his safety and his wages. Thomas lets Isaac stay in the schoolroom. Under North Carolina law this is a crime, and so every lesson Isaac sits through is contraband and every person who knows about it is implicated. Isaac learns faster than Liam, and learns early to keep that fact inside the room. Lily discovers the lessons and is caught between a pride she cannot say out loud and a terror she cannot say either.

The world narrows as the boys grow. Ephraim Miller, an enslaved field boy a year older than Isaac, teaches him the tobacco rows; when Isaac is bitten by a copperhead, Ephraim breaks from his row without leave and runs two miles for help, and is whipped for it. It is Isaac's first hard lesson in what other people pay for his rescues. William returns from England with a second wife, Frances Hale Gatlin, carried out of a country that abolished slavery in 1833 and set down in a house built on it. And Samuel MacKinne, the overseer, a landless white man who resents that an enslaved woman has his employer's ear in a way he never will, begins watching Isaac for an infraction he can use.

He finds his opening while William is at sea. MacKinne arranges to sell Isaac to Pettigrew, a planter eleven miles off, a soft-faced and pleasant man who inspects Isaac in the sunshine—hands, back, teeth—without breaking his sentence. William comes home and reverses the sale. Nothing about Isaac's position has changed; only the identity of the man holding the pen. In the same stretch of years Liam is taken to an auction and taught by his father how to appraise a human being, and begins to understand exactly what he stands to inherit.

By 1854 what is between the two of them has become something for which neither has a word. Lily sees it before they do. What she does about it is not what either boy expects, and in the doing she tells Isaac the name she was born with and has kept unspoken for fifty years. When Thomas steers Liam toward Yale, William makes Isaac a going-away present to his son—a human being handed over inside a gesture meant as generosity—blind to the fact that he has just handed him a road to free soil.

The journey north runs by coast and rail through country where patrols stop Black travelers and ask to see paper. New Haven, when they reach it, turns out to be free soil and not freedom. Liam at Yale discovers both his own ordinariness and how cheaply a Northern conscience can be had by a man it costs nothing. Isaac reads law in borrowed rooms, takes up fugitive-aid work at the African church at the head of Temple Street alongside Hester Poole, and is told plainly by Elias Cuffee, a free-born New Havener who owes him no warmth, that a man still legally property is a loaded gun on a table, borrowing courage off an account its owners do not know they have lent. Ambrose Fell, a law student a year ahead of Liam, works out Isaac's status from ordinary observation in about two hours and tells Liam what he has refused to see: the arrangement itself is the exposure, and the only door out is manumission.

In February of 1855 the paper comes down from North Carolina. Isaac is twenty years old. He takes a surname that is not Gatlin, and the question the rest of the book belongs to is what a man does with a freedom that was given to him rather than won.

What Isaac decides, and what it costs the two of them, is left where it belongs—in the closing chapters.

THE CAST

II. Principal Characters

Who's who in the novel

Isaac

Born enslaved at Bellwether, Lily's son, two years older than Liam and his intellectual equal or better. Educated in secret beside the master's son, he learns faster because he cannot take learning for granted, and he reads a room before entering it as a lifelong habit. His intellect is itself subversive—living proof of the lie the whole arrangement rests on. The surname Gatlin is an imposition rather than a name; at manumission he chooses his own.

Liam Gatlin

William's only son, raised by Lily and in love with Isaac from childhood, and a beneficiary all his life of the institution that owns him. Sent north to Yale, he finds both the limits of his own gifts and how little a conscience costs the man who never has to spend anything on it.

Lily

Isaac's mother and the manager of the Gatlin household: the other house servants answer to her, William defers to her on domestic matters, and the boys obey her. Authority without ownership, indispensability without security—she commands a house she can be sold out of. She is also Liam's true mother in every sense but law. Her pride in Isaac's literacy wars constantly with her terror of what it may cost him.

William Gatlin

Planter and tobacco merchant, frequently in England, and therefore a half-absent presence through his son's childhood—absences in which the boys' intimacy incubates and in which MacKinne is most dangerous. Capable of genuine tenderness and of the structural blindness of ownership at the same time. He "knows without knowing" about Isaac's lessons: he notices that the boy reads, declines to ask how, and sails again.

Sarah Gatlin

William's first wife, who dies in childbirth when Liam is four, the infant lost with her. Her death is the wound that makes the entire arrangement possible.

Frances Hale Gatlin

William's English second wife, arriving with eleven trunks, four of them books, freight paid. Lily unpacks her and knows her in a day: *She's not cold. She's holding still.* Three thousand miles from anyone she could say a frightened thing to, she is the voice of how things are done—a threat by way of propriety rather than villainy.

Thomas Shackelford

Liam's tutor, a graduate of William & Mary and a Quaker who keeps his abolitionism private for the sake of his safety and his employment. Letting Isaac stay in the schoolroom is real courage; his silence about everything else, and his master's wages, are real complicity. He is the quiet architect of the road north.

Samuel MacKinne

The overseer, and the daily instrument of the plantation's violence while the owner keeps his hands clean. A landless white man looked down on by the class he serves, his cruelty is compensation for his own humiliation rather than motive in itself. His grievance concentrates on Isaac: a slave with privileges, and two boys he senses are too close without having any language for it.

Ephraim Miller

An enslaved field boy a year older than Isaac, and Isaac's own friend rather than a shared one. He teaches Isaac the work in the tobacco rows, and when Isaac is bitten he leaves his row without leave and runs for help, knowing what leaving the field will cost him.

Old Cato

Sold twice himself before he came to Bellwether at forty, and the quarter's institutional memory. When Isaac is threatened with sale, Cato sits him on a step and delivers an hour of survival instruction with no comfort anywhere in it: work steady, not fast; find out who eats first; find out where the water is at night. His central warning is the one Isaac spends the rest of the novel breaking. *You tell 'em nothing about your head. A man that keeps books don't get to put the book down… You be a good pair of hands. Good hands is the longest life there is.*

Molly

The cook, and part of the household staff under Lily's authority. She is the one who comes and stands beside Lily in the yard after the wagon has gone, says nothing at all for a minute, and then puts a hand on her back.

Aunt Charity

Of the quarter at Bellwether. She gives Isaac dried gourd seed to plant his first spring wherever they put him, because a man with a gourd vine has something of his own growing, and it looks like nothing to anybody, and they will let him keep it.

Pettigrew

A neighboring planter eleven miles off, and the man MacKinne arranges to sell Isaac to. Soft-faced, pleasant, conversational, and entirely without cruelty as he examines a boy he is thinking of buying. *He wasn't being unkind to me. He was being careful with his money.*

Ambrose Fell

A Yale law student a year ahead of Liam: thin, dark, quiet, never writing anything down and always knowing the answer, and a watcher of rooms in the way of people who have had to be. He deduces Isaac's legal status from ordinary observation, warns Liam that the arrangement itself is the danger, and then makes an approach of his own that must be phrased so that nothing in it could ever be proved.

Elias Cuffee

Free-born in New Haven as his father was before him, with a caulking trade, a church pew, and a great deal of unforgiving work behind him. He embodies a different kind of Black freedom from Isaac's—never owned, never anybody's gift—and he is the novel's hardest and fairest voice: *Get free and then come back down them stairs and I'll shake your hand like a man.*

Hester Poole

Eleven years in the fugitive-aid work at New Haven, with a face like a closed door. She corrects Isaac in his first week for wanting to know the names of the people passing through: *You don't want it. And they don't want to give it.*

Nathaniel Wardwell

A Black attorney in Boston, near fifty, with rooms above a stationer's on Washington Street and a brass plate polished daily. He was admitted in Massachusetts because Connecticut's bar was closed to men like him. His own father purchased himself out of Delaware in 1809—eleven years and three hundred forty dollars, above market, because the owner knew what he had.

CONTEXT

III. The History Behind the Fiction

Where the record ends and the novel begins

The Child Follows the Mother

The rule that a child inherited the condition of its mother rather than its father entered colonial law in Virginia in 1662 and passed from there into the slave codes of the South. It is the reason Isaac is born property in the same house where Liam is born heir, and the reason nothing Lily achieves inside that household can reach her own son.

The principle is real. Bellwether and the Gatlins are invented.

Teaching a Slave to Read

Following Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, North Carolina moved to close off literacy among the enslaved, making it an offense to teach an enslaved person to read or write and attaching penalties that fell differently on white offenders, free Black offenders, and the enslaved themselves.

Thomas Shackelford's schoolroom is therefore a criminal enterprise conducted daily in his employer's house, and the danger the novel attaches to Isaac's lessons is not dramatized upward. For Isaac, education is not merely schooling: the ability to read gives him access to ideas the institution depends upon withholding, and it becomes one of his earliest acts of self-determination.

Freedom Was Not a Single Boundary

The Mason-Dixon Line has become a powerful cultural shorthand for the border between slavery and freedom, but antebellum America was considerably more complicated. Slave and free states existed alongside one another, and free Black Americans in the North faced discrimination, restricted opportunity, and racial violence.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made the distinction thinner still. It obliged citizens of free states to assist in the capture of people who had escaped slavery, denied the accused a jury trial and the right to testify, and paid the adjudicating commissioner a larger fee for a finding of slavery than for a finding of freedom. Patrols stopping Black travelers on the roads north to demand papers are part of the documented record. For Isaac, travelling north represents increasing possibility rather than arrival.

The College That Was Never Built

In 1831 a proposal to establish a college for Black students in New Haven was put to a town meeting and voted down overwhelmingly. Two years later Prudence Crandall was prosecuted in Connecticut for admitting Black girls to her school in Canterbury. David Daggett, who instructed the jury that free Black Americans were not citizens within the meaning of the Constitution, had been mayor of New Haven and Chief Justice of Connecticut, and taught in the Yale law school.

All of this is real, and all of it had happened within living memory of the term Liam spends there. Free soil had an architecture of its own.

Black Lawyers Before the War

Macon Bolling Allen was admitted to the bar in Maine in 1844 and in Massachusetts the following year, the first Black attorney in the United States. Robert Morris, admitted in Massachusetts in 1847, argued *Roberts v. City of Boston* in 1849, the school-segregation case whose reasoning would echo through American law for a century. Connecticut remained effectively closed: Edwin Archer Randolph, the first Black graduate of the Yale law school, did not take his degree until 1880.

Nathaniel Wardwell is invented. The walls he describes to Isaac are not, and neither is the arithmetic —that a man in Isaac's position in 1855 could count the Black attorneys in the whole country on his fingers.

Temple Street

The African Congregational church at the head of Temple Street in New Haven was a real congregation of the period and a real node in the network that moved people north. Hester Poole, Elias Cuffee, and the particular cellar beneath the particular stairs are the author's inventions; the work done in rooms like it was not.

Free Black communities in northern cities built churches, schools, businesses, newspapers, and professional networks long before emancipation. Their presence in Isaac's later life matters because it offers him something he almost never had as a child: the sight of Black men defining their own futures.

The Photographer on Chapel Street

Henry Hopper was a working New Haven photographer of the period, with a gallery on Chapel Street. The novel puts invented men in a real room.

Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century

Liam and Isaac live before modern concepts such as "gay identity" developed into their contemporary forms. Same-sex desire and relationships certainly existed, but the language, social categories, legal environment, and expectations surrounding them differed substantially from those familiar to readers today.

The novel therefore asks not simply whether the two men can acknowledge their love, but how two nineteenth-century men might understand feelings for which their society gives them few acceptable models. It is why Ambrose Fell must make his offer in language that could always be denied, and why nobody in the book ever says the thing plainly.

DISCUSSION

IV. Questions for Discussion

Twenty questions for your group

1 When do Liam and Isaac first understand that they are not equals?

As children, they share experiences that can sometimes make the boundaries between them appear less important than they actually are.

- At what point does each boy begin to understand what slavery means for their relationship? Does Liam understand it differently from Isaac?

2 Can genuine friendship exist between an enslaved person and the person who may someday own him?

Liam loves Isaac, but he also benefits from the institution responsible for Isaac's enslavement.

- Does that make equality between them impossible while Isaac remains enslaved? Can affection overcome such an extreme imbalance of power, or must the imbalance itself first be destroyed?

3 Who possesses power in their relationship—and does that change?

At the beginning of the novel, the answer might seem obvious. Liam is white, free, educated, and the son of Isaac's enslaver.

But consider the different forms power takes throughout the story: legal, economic, physical, intellectual, emotional, and sexual.

- Does the balance between Liam and Isaac change as they grow older?

4 Why is Isaac's education so important?

Isaac's secret education is dangerous precisely because literacy gives an enslaved person access to ideas and possibilities beyond the world prescribed for him.

- Does learning to read make Isaac freer even before his legal status changes?
- Or does education initially make his enslavement more painful because he can more clearly understand what is being denied to him?

5 Education transforms both young men—but in very different ways. How?

Liam's education is expected and encouraged. Isaac's must be acquired secretly.

- How does that difference affect the way each man values knowledge?
- What does the novel suggest about education as a source of privilege, resistance, opportunity, or liberation?

6 What does Lily understand that Liam and Isaac do not?

Lily has lived within slavery far longer than either young man and understands both its dangers and the compromises required to survive it.

- How does her perspective differ from Isaac's?
- Do you see Lily primarily as protective, pragmatic, fearful, resistant—or some combination of these?

7 What responsibilities does William Gatlin bear?

William can display affection, generosity, or paternal concern while simultaneously participating in a system in which human beings are property.

- How should readers evaluate a person who behaves decently within an institution that is fundamentally indecent?
- Does personal kindness mitigate participation in slavery—or make its contradictions more disturbing?

8 Why is the possibility of Isaac being sold so significant?

Until that possibility becomes real, Liam can experience Bellwether as a relatively stable world.

For Isaac, however, stability has always depended upon the decisions of other people.

- How does the threat of sale change Liam's understanding of slavery? How does it change Isaac's?

9 What does the manumission of Isaac actually accomplish?

Legal freedom is obviously transformative. But does the novel portray manumission as the end of Isaac's struggle or the beginning of a different one?

- What remains beyond his control after he is legally free?

10 Why is traveling north important beyond the physical journey itself?

As Liam and Isaac move from North Carolina toward New Haven, they cross geographic boundaries between slave and free states.

- Do those boundaries correspond to genuine freedom?
- At what point in the journey, if any, do you believe Isaac is truly on "free ground"?

11 What does the title *On Free Ground* mean to you?

- Does "free ground" refer primarily to geography?
- Legal status?
- Education?
- Economic independence?
- The ability to choose whom one loves?
- Or does the meaning of the title change during the novel?

12 How does race continue to shape Isaac's life after slavery no longer legally defines him?

Freedom does not erase the assumptions other people make about Isaac.

- How does he navigate a society in which he may be legally free but is not necessarily treated as equal?
- What kinds of freedom remain beyond his reach?

13 How does sexuality complicate Liam and Isaac's search for freedom?

Escaping the restrictions of slavery does not place either man outside the social expectations surrounding sexuality in nineteenth-century America.

- Does their relationship create another form of secrecy?
- How is that secrecy similar to Isaac's earlier need to conceal his education—and how is it fundamentally different?

14 Is Liam's love for Isaac enough?

Liam's feelings may be sincere, but sincerity cannot erase the circumstances into which they were born.

- What must Liam learn—or relinquish—before he can love Isaac as an equal rather than as someone whose life has always been entangled with his own privilege?

15 How important is Isaac's ability to choose Liam?

For much of his life, fundamental choices have been made for Isaac: where he lives, what work he performs, whether he may be educated, and whether he can remain with the people he loves.

- How does that history change the significance of romantic choice?
- Is the freedom to say no as important as the freedom to say yes?

16 What is the significance of Isaac encountering educated free Black men?

Isaac's exposure to Black professionals—and particularly to a Black attorney—expands his conception of what his own future might contain.

- Why might seeing someone who has already accomplished what society tells you is impossible be different from simply being told that such a future exists?

17 How does the study of law affect Isaac's relationship to his past?

The law once defined Isaac as property.

Later, law becomes something he can study and potentially use.

- What do you make of that reversal?
- Can mastering the machinery of a system that once oppressed someone become a form of empowerment?

18 Who changes more over the course of the novel: Isaac or Liam?

Consider the boys we meet near the beginning and the young men they eventually become.

- Whose worldview changes most dramatically?
- Whose transformation was more difficult?

19 Which secondary character most changed your understanding of the story?

Consider Lily, William Gatlin, Thomas, Nathaniel Wardwell, and others Isaac and Liam encounter.

- Did any character cause you to reconsider something you initially believed about Liam, Isaac, slavery, education, race, or freedom?

20 What does the novel ultimately say freedom is?

By the end of the story, consider all the forms of freedom the characters encounter:

> *freedom from ownership; freedom of movement; freedom to learn; freedom to earn; freedom to choose one's future; freedom to love; and freedom to define oneself.*

- Which matters most?
- Can someone be free if even one of these is denied?

GOING DEEPER

V. Questions That May Divide the Room

Questions the novel refuses to settle

Some of the most rewarding book-club conversations begin with questions for which the novel provides no simple answer.

I *Could Liam and Isaac ever have had an equal relationship while Isaac was enslaved?*

II *Does Liam bear moral responsibility for privileges he inherited but did not create?*

III *Was William Gatlin a good man participating in an evil institution, or does participation in that institution make the distinction meaningless?*

IV *Does Isaac owe Liam anything for helping him become free?*

V *Would Isaac have become the same man without Liam?*

VI *Would Liam have become the same man without Isaac?*

VII *If Isaac had ultimately chosen a life without Liam, would that have represented an equally valid expression of his freedom?*

BEFORE YOU CLOSE THE BOOK

VI. A Final Question

A way to end the evening

Before ending your discussion, return to the title.

At the beginning of the evening, ask everyone privately to complete this sentence:

WRITE IT DOWN

"To be free means _____."

1. Discuss the novel.
2. Then ask everyone to complete the sentence again.

Did anyone's answer change?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg McDonald

Greg McDonald is the author of *On Free Ground*, his debut novel. Combining historical research with a character-driven story, the novel examines how slavery, education, sexuality, and personal autonomy intersect in the lives of two young men coming of age in nineteenth-century America.

Book clubs are welcome to reproduce this guide for discussion purposes. If your group would like to arrange a virtual visit with the author, please write to info@omniunamedia.com. · © 2026 Greg McDonald, Omniuna Media.

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