

Chasing Me to My Grave
Winfred Rembert as told to Erin I. Kelly

Reading Group Guide

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of *Chasing Me to My Grave*.

About this book

Winfred Rembert grew up in a family of Georgia field laborers and joined the Civil Rights Movement as a teenager. He was arrested after fleeing a demonstration, survived a near-lynching at the hands of law enforcement, and spent seven years on chain gangs. During that time he met the undaunted Patsy, who would become his wife. Years later, at the age of fifty-one and with Patsy's encouragement, he started drawing and painting scenes from his youth using leather tooling skills he learned in prison.

Chasing Me to My Grave presents Rembert's breathtaking body of work alongside his story, as told to Tufts Philosopher Erin I. Kelly. Rembert calls forth vibrant scenes of Black life on Hamilton Avenue in Cuthbert, Georgia, where he first glimpsed the possibility of a life outside the cotton field. As he pays tribute, exuberant and heartfelt, to Cuthbert's Black community and the people, including Patsy, who helped him to find the courage to revisit a traumatic past, Rembert brings to life the promise and the danger of Civil Rights protest, the brutalities of incarceration, his search for his mother's love, and the epic bond he found with Patsy.

Vivid, confrontational, revelatory, and complex, *Chasing Me to My Grave* is a searing memoir in prose and painted leather that celebrates Black life and summons readers to confront painful and urgent realities at the heart of American history and society.

For discussion

1. This memoir was composed through a collaborative process of conversation, transcribed interviews, writing, and editing between Winfred Rembert and Erin I. Kelly. How does Rembert's direct, conversational tone impact your experience of his story?
2. What did you learn from Rembert's experience as a Black American living in the Jim Crow South in the twentieth century that you didn't know before? Did your reading change any previously held beliefs or assumptions? Did the book impact your understanding of how the legacy of slavery persists today?
3. Describing the conditions of prison labor he experienced, Rembert refers to a law in Georgia that was supposed to prohibit prisoners from working in temperatures under 32 degrees. However, he says: "It was a law that was just a law. They didn't care about laws when you were working on the chain gang." Throughout this memoir, when and why are laws distorted or ignored? What does *Chasing Me to My Grave* reveal about the American criminal justice system?

4. When he is nearly lynched, Rembert recalls Mama's philosophy of survival: "Mama's idea was to stay alive, and she was passionate about that . . . Her idea was to please White people." When does Rembert adopt Mama's mentality, and when does he take a different course? How does the tension between different modes of survival affect his story?
5. The fifteenth chapter of *Chasing Me to My Grave* is told from Patsy's perspective. How does her point of view change your sense of Rembert's story?
6. Throughout the memoir, how does Rembert describe the experience of being a Black male under Jim Crow?
7. After Rembert describes the doubt he experienced at the beginning of his art career, he repeatedly refers to Patsy's assurances that his perspective and medium are singular. She told him: "There is nobody doing this. Nobody tells their life story on leather. *Nobody.*" What might individual narratives offer that a broader depiction of history cannot? What might tooled and dyed leather pictures offer that more traditional paintings do not?
8. How does Rembert's experience of Blackness—from his childhood in Cuthbert, to his time spent in prison and in chain gangs, to his short career as a drug dealer in Connecticut, to his life as an artist—shift through time and space? What dynamics remain consistent? What changes?
9. How does Rembert grow over the course of his life, in his telling? In what ways were his creativity, self-belief, and intelligence evident from his early life?
10. When Rembert recounts watching J. T. lose his eye while being beaten by the police, he considers, "I carried this all of my life, all of these things that happened to me," but says, "I didn't realize that by keeping my story inside so long, it would change my life and make me sick." When and how does the trauma of the violence he endured surface? What compels him to eventually share his story, and to do so in prose and pictures?
11. Consider the title of the memoir. How does the title *Chasing Me to My Grave* frame Rembert's story? To what extent did Rembert's encounters with White violence influence the rest of his life?
12. While the leatherworks featured in *Chasing Me to My Grave* depict moments from Rembert's early life, he made them all after the age of fifty. The book itself began to take shape in 2018, when Rembert was in his early seventies. How does the perspective of hindsight influence his visual art and verbal narrative?
13. Consider works like *Winfred's Pool Room* (p. 61), *Doll's Head Baseball* (p. 85–6), *Georgia Justice* (p. 122), or *All Me* (p. 144). How did these enrich your understanding of Rembert's life and the world he lived in? How would you describe his style as an artist, and how do you see it changing from work to work?
14. Rembert remembers figures from Cuthbert's Black community with fondness and love. How do these memories sustain him? What do you find most powerful about the love between Winfred and Patsy?

15. Why is it important to Rembert to tell about his life and the lives of other Black Americans who lived in Georgia under Jim Crow?