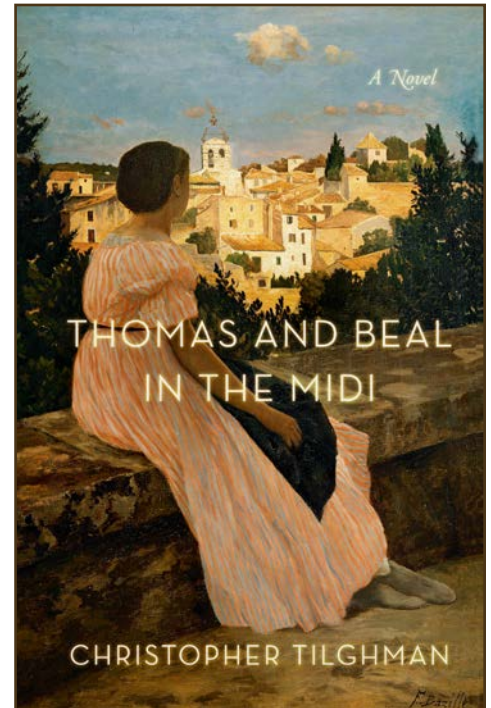


# Reading Group Gold

## *Thomas and Beal in the Midi*

*A Novel*

by Christopher Tilghman



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The moving story of two young lovers who flee oppressive American mores to begin their lives anew in France during the 1890s, *Thomas and Beal in the Midi* adds a lush new dimension to Christopher Tilghman's acclaimed novels *Mason's Retreat* and *The Right-Hand Shore*. Descended from slaves, the enchanting Beal Terrell has won the heart of Thomas Bayly, a descendant of white landowners. They are kindred spirits, deeply attached to their families and to the community they have called home since they were children. But building a life together as husband and wife means sacrificing those ties and voyaging across the Atlantic, where they become part of a vibrant expatriate community in Paris's Latin Quarter. Later, venturing even farther, they put down roots in the rugged region of Languedoc, mastering the craft of winemaking while learning the cultural nuances of a tight-knit rural community. The resulting scenes form a portrait of a marriage that is highly unusual yet marked by universal experiences that transcend culture and ancestry.

This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of *Thomas and Beal in the Midi*. We hope that the following topics will add to your enjoyment of this poignant meditation on love that endures for a lifetime.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What were your first impressions of Thomas and Beal in the opening scene? What was the effect of meeting them through the eyes of Madame Bernault?

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2. Is Beal taking a greater risk than Thomas when they leave America behind? If you were in her situation, would you follow your heart? What is the riskiest life change you have ever made?
3. As they become immersed in a community of artists and outsiders, what awakenings do Thomas and Beal experience? When Beal sits for Arthur, how does her perception of the physical body change?
4. Discuss the ironies of Thomas and Beal's voyage; her ancestors arrived in America on slave ships heading west, and she has to travel in steerage as her ship sails east. How does she adapt from being a servant to having servants?
5. How might Beal's life have unfolded if she had followed Diallo Touré to Senegal? Did your opinion of him shift after his departure? How does his effect on Beal compare to Eileen's effect on Thomas?
6. What does "faithfulness" mean as it plays out in the novel? Which is more destructive in a marriage, sexual infidelity or a deep emotional attachment to someone who is not your spouse?
7. How does Thomas and Beal's marriage evolve as they grow older? In what way are their transitions typical of all married couples, and how are their challenges exacerbated by being an interracial couple?
8. If Paris and Languedoc were characters in the book, how would you describe their personalities? How do the novel's urban and rural communities help Thomas and Beal create a new definition of home?
9. As a storyteller, Christopher Tilghman brings to life a broad variety of historical elements. Does it matter that the author has much more in common with Thomas's ancestors than with Beal's?
10. By the time Thomas's cousin Edward Mason and Edward's wife, Edith, visit, how has the significance of the Retreat, along with the memory of Mary, changed in Thomas's life? Is his vineyard a reflection of his family's legacy, or does the vineyard represent his break from tradition?
11. What does it take to gain status and become socially accepted in Languedoc, compared to in America?
12. As Thomas looks back on his life and considers the world that his children inhabit (while a civil war erupts in Spain), what does he come to understand about the effects of his choices on his children? Though his son Randall, the "blackbird," was spared the same severe degree of racism faced by the Uncle Randall he never knew, why weren't the next generations able to eradicate racism altogether?

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13. In one of her journal entries, Beal writes, “I now have so much, and Mama and Daddy, all they have, all they have gotten from their life and love, could go into a single chest of drawers. Yet they are so content with their ordinary happiness.” What does the novel ultimately say about finding love and happiness?
14. Have you or your ancestors experienced a migration to a new community? If so, what traditions and mindsets withstood the journey? Which aspects were lost?
15. How did this novel enhance your experience of the other novels in the Mason family saga, *Mason’s Retreat* and *The Right-Hand Shore*? What is unique about the way Christopher Tilghman weaves his characters’ private thoughts in with their public lives?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Christopher Tilghman is the author of two short-story collections, *In a Father’s Place* and *The Way People Run*, and three previous novels, *The Right-Hand Shore*, *Mason’s Retreat*, and *Roads of the Heart*. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Guide written by Amy Root Clements