Questions for Discussion

1. *The Wind Done Gone* is a novel written in the form of a first-person diary. How would you describe Cynara's voice? How does her language evolve over the course of the book?

2. Mammy is a very complex character: a lover, friend, mother, nurse, and possible murderer. To whom does she give life? Who suspects that she is a murderer? Who is she thought to have murdered? What is the nature of her relationship with Lady? How does the relationship change? What is the nature of her relationship with Other? How does this relationship change? What does Garlic mean when he states over her grave that she is the true mistress of the house?

3. Vengeance is an important theme in this novel. The act of writing a parody of another novel can be understood as an act of literary vengeance. Which character achieves the most explicit and sinister act of literal vengeance?

4. In Southern English the word "tata" is used to mean both "thank you" and "you're welcome," particularly between people of unequal status. It is also means "breast." Tata is the name of the plantation house in which Cynara is born. What does the house look like? Who designed it? What does the house Tata suggest about the nature of African-American intellect?
5. *The Wind Done Gone* makes significant use of a variety of homonyms (words that sound alike but mean different things). In the very first paragraph we have the word "tiers," evoking the word "tears," and the word "peridot," evoking the word "parody." Here Mammy has a first name, Pallas. How does this name enhance our sense that the people of Tata are living in the breast of Mammy?

6. The cakewalk was a plantation dance in which blacks competed against other blacks to ridicule and scorn the way plantation aristocrats danced their quadrilles. With this in mind, how does the fact that R. gives Cynara a cake foreshadow the notion that Other is part black? Where else is the word "cakewalk" mentioned in the novel?

7. What makes the Congressman attractive to Cynara? What vow does she break to be with him? What impact would the relationship with Cynara have on the Congressman's career?

8. Cynara's relationship with R. begins when he purchases her as a teenager. In what sense can she be described as a sexually abused child? What evidence do we have that Cynara is emotionally damaged by the relationship? Why does Cynara contrive for R. to meet Other? How does her competition with Other for R.'s affections parallel her competition with Other for Mammy's affections? In what significant way are the relationships different? Why does she marry R.? Why does she leave him? When does Cynara begin to be aware that R. is old?

9. Beauty and Dreamy Gentleman are both presented as gay characters. They are also two of the few white characters who "stay" white. What does this suggest? In what sense does *The Wind Done Gone* tend to erase the color line?

10. At the end of *The Wind Done Gone*, a baby is born. Who is the child's father? How is this known? Who is the child's biological mother? Who raises the child as her own? What story in the Hebrew Bible does this bring to mind?

11. If the novel *Gone With the Wind* suggests that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites, that the proper role of the black mother is to tend a white charge, and that black politicians are inferior, how far does *The Wind Done Gone* go in rebuking and scorning these claims?

12. Mealy Mouth is presented as a multiple sadistic murderer in *The Wind Done Gone*. In *Gone With the Wind*, Melanie is presented as the epitome of a sweet, lily-white lady. How is the portrayal of Mealy Mouth a comment on the complicity of Southern ladies in the evils of slavery?

13. The Congressman is not the only black man in Cynara's life. How does Cynara's changing understanding of Garlic's power influence her attraction to the Congressman? Who is Cynara's first black male suitor? What is his claim on her heart?
14. Cynara is an herb finder, a loan maker, a songwriter, a diarist, a lover, a friend, and finally a mother. In each of these roles she is uniquely vulnerable and uniquely gifted. In which role is she most successful?

15. How does Cynara's experience as a servant influence her dealings with servants and tradespeople?

16. The scope of Cynara's world extends beyond the American South. Atlanta is not the dominant city. To what other cities does Cynara travel? What city influences her most? How is the geographical position of this city significant?

17. Throughout the book runs the theme that things or beings that look the same can be very, very different: Cynara, Other; emeralds, peridots, green glass; killing herbs, curing herbs. In what sense does this theme compel the reader to play close attention?

18. The great political tragedy of Gone With the Wind is the South’s loss of the Civil War. The great political tragedy of The Wind Done Gone is the end of what?

19. What does the butterfly on Cynara's cheek signify?

20. If you were told that there is an African-American tradition of coded language, how would you connect this novel to that tradition? What does it mean for a book to talk back to another book?

About the Cakewalk

The cakewalk was originally a plantation dance. But it's more than a dance: it's a sly parody of European quadrilles created by enslaved African Americans. From the very beginning it has black and white in it. Blacks observed whites and created a commentary, with dance, based on their observations. What becomes immediately interesting, complicated, and especially relevant to this discussion is the fact that in many cases, white folks living on great plantations misunderstood the dance to be an imitation of European dance. Many Southern aristocrats perceived the cakewalk to be a gross or vulgar mimicry, which ultimately they found amusing, as an illustration of black inferiority. In truth, the cakewalk was a subtle and critical commentary on the differences between the aesthetics of black and white dance styles. In time, plantation owners began to encourage cakewalk contests or competitions between black dancers. The winning dancer or dance pair were rewarded with a cake, so to win the contest was to "take the cake."

Later, the cakewalk moved from the plantation to the city via vaudeville, where it
was performed in minstrel shows, often by white dancers in blackface. Then the dance moved back into the black community, transformed by blacks who further exaggerated the steps, adding an additional layer of commentary (responsive to the white minstrel performances) and another level to the rapidly evolving performance.

Thus, the phrase "That takes the cake" comes from the cakewalk experience and means "That wins." The phrase "a piece of cake" is also thought to derive from this dance. Connoting the expectation of winning in the future, it is a possible reduction of the statement "In the future I will win and get a piece of cake."

But who wins? What is rewarded? Most European social dancing is performed upright, with the body held rigid. Most of the movement is in the feet. In many of these dances, participants are face to face. In contrast, face-to-face dancing is not part of any African tradition, and in West Africa, many dance movements originate in the abdomen and the hips. Thus, the chalk line walk, as the cakewalk was called in its early life, sometimes involved dancers who walked in a straight line while balancing buckets of water on their heads to mimic what they perceived to be the excessive rigidity in their so-called masters. However, subversive additions that transformed the very nature of the dance were added. These included exaggerated bending backwards, dropping the hands at the wrist, and high kicking, all while maintaining an element of rigidity.

In performing this dance, a parody of plantation masters' aristocratic manners that incorporated loose leg movements and abdominal and hip action as well as rigidity, face-to-face elements, and side-by-side elements, early black dancers asserted that "I can do what you do and do it better, maintaining pattern and rigidity"; "I can do something you can't do — achieve a level of looseness"; and (by far the most complex statement embedded in the dance) "I can acknowledge that I both understand and have mastered your aesthetics while baffling you with a coded expression of my own. I can make a fool of you and get you to pay me with pastry. Now don't that take the cake?"

It is worth noting that minstrel shows — shows in which whites put on blackface and danced and sang "like" blacks — are in themselves subversive. With the minstrel show, white dancers assert to black dancers, "I can do what you do and do it better. I can be black better than you can." Whether or not this is judged to be a winning performance, whether it takes the cake, will depend on who's doing the judging.

About the Author
Alice Randall was born in Detroit, Michigan, in an enclave of Motown populated almost exclusively with refugees from Alabama. She grew up in Washington, D.C., and then attended Harvard University, from which she graduated in 1981 with an honors degree in English and American literature. In 1983 she moved to Nashville to become a country songwriter. The only African-American woman in history to write a number-one country song, she has had over twenty songs recorded, including two top ten records and a top forty. Her work includes the only known recorded country songs to explore the subject of lynching ("The Ballad of Sally Ann"), mention Aretha Franklin in the same line as Patsy Cline ("XXX's and OOO's: An American Girl"), and give tribute to both the slave dead and the Confederate dead ("I'll Cry for Yours, Will You Cry for Mine?"). Ms. Randall is also a produced screenwriter (a movie of the week for CBS) and has worked on adaptations of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Parting the Waters, and Brer Rabbit.

The mother of Caroline Randall Williams (who is the great-granddaughter of the Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps) and the wife of attorney David Ewing (a ninth-generation resident of Nashville and a great-great-grandson of Prince Albert Ewing, the first African American to practice law in Tennessee), Alice Randall Ewing lives deeply down south. Early in their courtship, Alice and David took Caroline on her first trip to Atlanta, a city that has long been important in Alice’s family because it is where her father, George, was briefly enrolled at Morris Brown, one of the nation's oldest black colleges.

The entire family is involved in documenting and preserving the history of people of color in the American South, with particular interest in the history of enslaved women and enslaved children and in the formerly enslaved who went on to striking academic achievement or whose children did. They have lectured, researched, consulted, and written about these topics, and have served on the boards of a variety of museums, historic houses, and institutions concerned with preserving and documenting the lives of enslaved people and their descendants, including Belle Meade Plantation, Carnton, the Hermitage (Andrew Jackson’s home), Traveler’s Rest, the Metro Historic Commission (of Nashville), the African-American Historical and Genealogical Association, the Family Cemetery Project, the Andrew Jackson’s Slave Descendant Project, and Fisk University.

A Conversation with Alice Randall

There are so many ways to approach this book — historical, racial, literary, autobiographical. For you as the writer, what is the most important?

The Wind Done Gone is a story of reading, writing, and redemption, the story of a woman, a black woman, who reads her way into writing and writes her way into redemption. It is in some sense my
story. When I was a girl of six or seven I fell in love with the television series *Batman*. And like many loves, there was something I hated in it too: I hated the fact that no one who looked like me was in the story. For two weeks after that awareness I was frustrated. The third week I wrote myself in. I literally began to write out *Batman* scripts and write a part for me into them, a Bat Girl part. My Bat Girl wasn't a sidekick; she was a catalyst; every time I wrote her into a story, she changed its ending. When they took *Batman* off the air, I made my first long-distance phone call. I wanted to save the show.

Later, when I read *Gone With the Wind* (*GWTW*), I fell in love with another pop culture artifact. This was a troubled love from the beginning. I had to overlook racist stereotyping and Klan whitewashing to appreciate the ambitious, resilient, hardworking, hard-loving character who is Scarlett. Like so many others, I managed to do it. Then one day, rereading the novel, an enormous question arose for me from the center of the text. Where are the mulattos on Tara? Where is Scarlett's half-sister? Almost immediately I knew I had to tell her story, tell the story that hadn't been told. Tell it because the silence injured me.

*In some sense, then, you are assuming the role of a "revisionist historian" and supplying what could have been, if GWTW was history and not fiction, a part of the story that has been consciously or unconsciously left out or suppressed.*

Yes. *GWTW* — the book, the movie, the costume, the quips — has reached the status of myth in our culture. *GWTW* is integrated into the fabric of our culture. It is more powerful than history because it is better known than history. Unfortunately, *GWTW* is an inaccurate portrait of Southern history. It's a South without miscegenation, a South without whippings, a South without families sold apart, a South without free blacks striving for their education, a South without Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. *GWTW* depicts a South that never, ever existed.

When I was growing up in Detroit, what I like to call Detroit, Alabama, the two phrases my father spoke to me most often were "Speak up, son, you're not down South," and "I want you to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves." I think I prefer to think of myself as a dutiful daughter than as a revisionist historian.

*Is the story you have written historically plausible?*

Everything in the book is historically accurate and quite plausibly could have happened. One of the things that is exceptional is the existence of a diary. We know white women of privilege frequently kept diaries during the period, and many of these diaries have been
handed down to us. Precious few diaries written by people of color have come down to us, but they are not unknown.

Many readers will be surprised by the character of the black Congressman, and some may consider him an anachronism in nineteenth-century America. Many blacks served in the Congress throughout the South during Reconstruction. This is fact, not fairy tale. I very much hope the book will provoke a new consideration of the Reconstruction period, particularly as it relates to African-American history.

Other readers may be surprised by Cynara's education. In fact, I dare say some will be surprised by her very intelligence. To those who find her intelligence improbable, there is nothing I care to say. To those who find her education improbable, I suggest they take a closer look at the writings of Frederick Douglass or Phillis Wheatley. And I inform them that black women attended and graduated from New England Medical College and Oberlin long before 1870. It is also suspected that black women attended the Seven Sisters in the nineteenth century, passing for white.

*If there is a historical element to the novel, what were some of your literary models?*

Reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys was a revelation to me. I loved and still love *Jane Eyre*, but Rhys's telling of the madwoman's story made me examine my assumptions. One novel delighted me, one expanded me. *The Wind Done Gone* was inspired by *Wide Sargasso Sea*. And of course Cynara owes a debt to *Moll Flanders*; both narrators are capable of a similar unabashed candor in describing romantic ardor.

In general I have a special fondness for the form the novel took when it was young. In addition to *Moll Flanders*, I could mention *Clarissa*, *A Sentimental Journey*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. These are works that I love which my heroine would also have read. My novel owes something to them, most particularly, perhaps with regard to the plotting of the central love story of the book.

Another of my favorite novels, one that Cynara could not have read (it was written after her death), is Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Several critics have suggested that the affair between Janie and Tea Cake is the most positive romance between a black woman and a black man in American literature. I hoped to add to the exploration of this theme. If I have achieved something in this direction, I think it is largely in the portrayal of Cynara’s erotic curiosity.
Of course, I was also influenced by the reading of slave narratives published and unpublished, notably the works of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, as well as the diaries of white women of the period, including the diary of Mary Chesnutt, who noted — and I paraphrase from memory — that white women "were willing to point out the mulattos on every place but their own."

And then last, but perhaps not least, there is country music. I'm an admirer of primitive forms and have written country songs for a while now. You can hear, I hope, some of the rhythms of country blues in Cynara's prose.

There are a number of more personal, autobiographical reasons that compelled you to write the book. Could you elaborate?

I come from a long line and have married into two different families of black people with Old South blue blood running through their veins. We call ourselves the not-so-tragic mulattos. I like to call us the ironic mulattos: we know we're black and we know we got the blue blood in us. Cynara's people are my people. To elaborate further would take us into the world of oral history. I have always been told that I am the direct descendant of a Confederate general, and to this day I believe that to be the case. I grew up with discussions about the conflict inherent in being the spawn of slaves and slaveholders.

When my grandfather died, his half-brother (his white brother) wrote my father a letter describing the childhood the two brothers had shared in Alabama. My father let me read that letter. Then he burned it. The day my grandfather died he couldn't read or write more than his name. My father said he couldn't let words on paper become the dominant truth just because they were words on paper.

I said earlier that my father frequently instructed me to "speak for those who cannot speak for themselves." Somewhere along the way I guess I decided I wanted to write for those who could not write for themselves.

The Wind Done Gone can be understood as a story about a mother-daughter relationship. Can you describe that and then say how your relationship to your own mother figured in the writing of the book?

TWGD is a novel about a woman who feels that she has always had a rival for her mother's affections; I never felt that. It is also a novel about the play of politics on the passion of mother-love, an intimate portrait of racism. Racism is not reserved for the public sphere. I learned that quite painfully in my own home.

My mother was a glamorous high-yellow beauty and successful
career woman who on the surface bears little resemblance to Mammy, but they share a particular trouble — a difficulty in loving that which is their own, particularly those who are dark.

The book is not autobiography thickly veiled. It is perhaps prescient, though. When I began writing this novel, my mother was well and thriving. In my novel a daughter with a troubled relation to her mother is summoned to her mother's deathbed. She must decide whether or not to go. After writing that scene, I got a call from my mother's doctor telling me that she had only weeks or months to live. I wrote it — then it happened to me.

You’ve had an interesting career, or rather series of careers. Can you tell us how you jumped from journalism, to country music, to writing screenplays, to writing fiction?

I always wanted to be a novelist. I got involved with the other writing to find a way to support my "serious writing." Along the way the other genres became my serious writing in their own time. I'm proud of being the first African-American woman songwriter with a number-one country song, but I'll be glad when I'm not still the only one.

You are a black woman who very deliberately moved back to the South. You describe the book as a reconciliation/healing with the South. What do you mean?

I like to say I was born in Detroit, Alabama. Everyone in my grandparents' neighborhood in Detroit had come straight up from Alabama on the train. The watermelon truck came down their street more often than the Popsicle truck. People were always talking about "down South" with much fear and loathing! My father would not let my grandmother take me down there, even for a short visit. As I said earlier, he hated the South. I can remember the day my relatives in Alabama first got to vote. We were so happy and grateful and confused as to why anyone would remain in a land where they remained permanently estranged.

As I got older and then moved on to Harvard, I came to realize that the world of the South was my world. As disconnected from the South as I was, as afraid of it as I was, grits figured in my family traumas, I had a daddy who claimed he had not worn shoes until he was thirteen years old and mysterious relations who had once owned great plantations and slaves. But more than this, I realized that I came from a storytelling people and a haunted people and I wanted to continue to live among them. And I wanted to write among them. I heard in the voice of William Faulkner the experience of my people told in tones of love and hate but devoid of respect, missing aspects. I feel this book bows toward Faulkner, and Capote, and Lee and says, "Yes, and this too is true. There is more. Listen, and I’ll tell it." Over
time I came to see the South as an abusive mother of black culture, but its mother nonetheless.