

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## READ

*The Sleeping Car Porter*  
by Suzette Mayr

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## LEARN

Black labour rights on  
Canada's railways

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## TAKE ACTION

Get involved in advocacy to  
change systemic racism

**JAN/FEB  
2024**

*A train enters a tunnel in front of Cathedral Peak.  
Published in the early 20th century in Alberta.  
(Photo by Transcendental Graphics/Getty Images)*

**AMNESTYBOOKCLUB.CA**

# A COMMUNITY THAT READS, LEARNS & ACTS TOGETHER



*Ketty Nivyabandi*  
Photo by Dave Chan

***Amnesty International is a human rights organization and global movement of more than 10 million people in over 170 countries and territories who campaign for human rights.***

## SAVE THE DATE



February is Black History Month in Canada.

## ***Ketty Nivyabandi***

Secretary General  
Amnesty International Canada

Welcome to Amnesty International Canada's Book Club. You are a critical part of this community that reads, learns and acts together for a better world.

This discussion guide is intended to help you spark and join conversations about recent notable works of fiction that weave compelling stories around the major human rights issues of our times.

Thousands of Amnesty Book Club members will discuss Suzette Mayr's *The Sleeping Car Porter* this year. The book won the 2022 Scotiabank Giller Prize and was nominated for other prominent literary awards. Mayr was the first 2SLGBTQIA+-identified writer ever to win the Giller. It also was the first 2SLGBTQIA+-themed novel to win the prestigious award.

I hope you'll enjoy reading and sharing this important book.

Upcoming titles  
in 2024



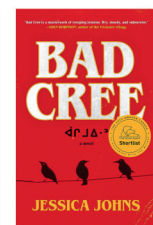
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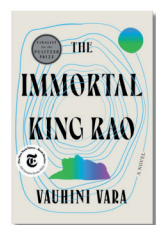
MAY/JUNE



JUL/AUG



SEPT/OCT



NOV/DEC



[AMNESTYBOOKCLUB.CA](http://AMNESTYBOOKCLUB.CA)



# THE BOOK

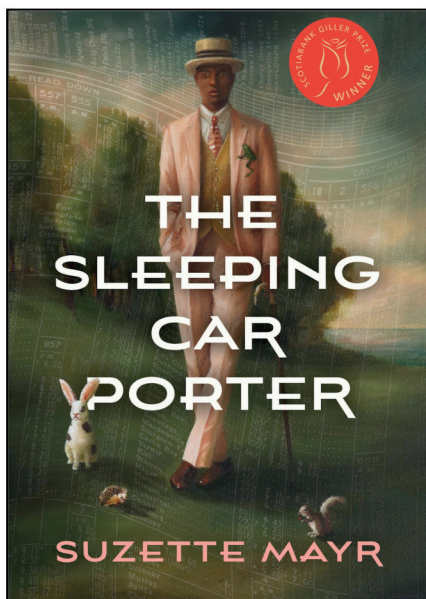


Photo by Jeremy Chan/Getty Images



**Suzette Mayr**  
Canadian Novelist

## *The Sleeping Car Porter*

By Suzette Mayr  
Coach House Books, 2022

*The Sleeping Car Porter* is set in the early 20th century during a period of significant importance in the context of Black Canadian history and the labour rights movement. This era experienced the growth of the civil rights movement, challenges to systemic racism, and the emergence of unions.

Black workers, like the protagonist Baxter, were at the forefront of these campaigns. They faced difficult working conditions and discrimination while also growing the Black middle class. This crucial moment is key to understanding Canada's complex history of racism, labour struggles, and the fight for equality.

*The Sleeping Car Porter* portrays the life of Baxter, a young, queer Black train porter riding the rails across Canada. His journey is punctuated by his gruelling work conditions and the train passenger prejudices -- a telling reflection of the broader struggle of Black Canadians of his time.

Mayr's writing style is known for its vivid imagery, rich character development, and the exploration of complex themes. Her narratives often explore issues of identity and race.

Source: Coach House Books

### LEARN MORE

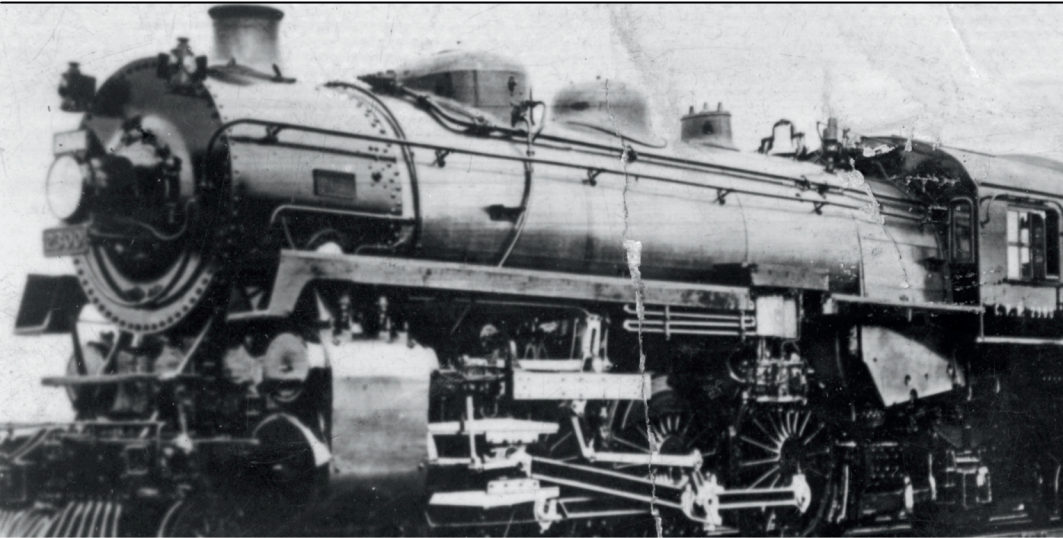


Listen to Suzette Mayr's interview on CBC's *The Next Chapter*. Aired: Jan. 7, 2023.  
<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter>



# BLACK LABOUR RIGHTS ON CANADA'S RAILWAYS

*Poor wages, precarious employment*



CP Rail engine, c1920s. Photo by The Print Collector/Getty Images



Sleeping car porter, 1943. Photo by Jack Delano via Corbis/Getty Images

Starting in the late 1800s, Black men from across North America, the Caribbean, and the Dutch East Indies worked as sleeping car porters for Canadian and American railway companies. On the job, they faced discrimination and exploitation. Most porters were Black men with university degrees in science, medicine, or business administration, and were denied other jobs due to racist attitudes in society. To improve their conditions and wages, porters unionized under the Order of Sleeping Car Porters and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

Source: "Black sleeping car porters," Travis Tomchuk, *The Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, 2014.

## LEARN MORE



"Black sleeping car porters," Travis Tomchuk, The Canadian Museum for Human Rights. <https://humanrights.ca/story/sleeping-car-porters>

## TAKE ACTION



Get involved in advocacy with organizations that address systemic racism and promote human rights.





# BLACK SLEEPING CAR PORTERS



Photo by CRHA/Exporail, Canadian Pacific Railway Company Fonds

“

Why did I get a job as a porter on the railway? I couldn't get anything else – and I didn't want to starve.”

*Stanley G. Grizzle, porter and organizer, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*



*Sleeping car porter with shoe polish, 1935. Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images*

## LEARN MORE



“My Name’s Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada” by Stanley G. Grizzle



Read Amnesty’s statement about recognizing Black and 2SLGBTQIA+ people in the *Employment Equity Act*. <https://amnesty.ca/human-rights-news/employment-act-changes>



Listen to Amnesty’s *Rights Back at You* podcast about anti-Black racism, policing, and surveillance. <https://amnesty.ca/rightsbackatyou/>



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(Left to right) Sleeping car porters Shirley Jackson, Pete Stevens, Harry Gairey and Jimmy Downes. Photo from Library and Archives Canada, PA-212572.*

February is Black History Month in Canada. The following questions are intended to spark thoughtful discussions and reflection on the struggles and achievements of Black Canadians throughout history and today:

- How does the setting of the train influence the narrative? Compare the dynamics when the train is stationary versus when it's moving.
- Why is Baxter's interest in teeth and dentistry significant for his character development?
- Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- Discuss your reactions to the physical hardships faced by Baxter.
- Explore how Baxter's identity impacts his interactions.
- Discuss how the book's themes relate to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Reflect on your prior knowledge of the history of Black porters in Canada. How did the book change or reinforce your understanding?
- Discuss how the book connects to the current Black Class Action lawsuit brought by current, former, and prospective Black workers alleging systemic anti-Black racism within the Canadian federal public service. What parallels do you see?
- Analyze the portrayal of labour rights and unionization in the book. How does it relate to today's labour movements?
- Reflect on the evolution of human rights for Black Canadians from the 20th century to today.

## TAKE ACTION



Share Amnesty's Book Club with your friends, family, and broader community on social media or [GoodReads.com](https://www.goodreads.com).



Support the Black Class Action, a lawsuit seeking redress for systemic discrimination against Black people in Canada's Public Service. <https://www.blackclassaction.ca>

