

## Readers' Guide: *To Sir, With Love*

**“I know for a fact that there are many vacancies for teachers in the East End of London.”**

**“Why especially the East End of London?”**

**“From all accounts it is rather a tough area, and most teachers prefer to seek jobs elsewhere.”**

**“And you think it would be just right for a Negro, I suppose.”**

*To Sir, With Love*, p. 47

Rick Braithwaite, “Sir,” in *To Sir, With Love*, does get a job teaching in the East End of London and his story unfolds from there. Based on the author’s real life experiences, *To Sir with Love* tells of the unlikely match between a highly educated, refined black male teacher and a class of adolescents from a low-income community.

This summer reading project prepares you to do the kind of active critical reading and thinking you will be expected to do in college. To develop your critical reading skills, we have provided a set of questions that ask you to read carefully: identifying the novel’s central message(s), paying attention to important details, and applying what you learn to your own life. The questions help you explore the story and your own thoughts about issues such as poverty, racial prejudice, and education. We hope you find the text a worthwhile reading experience.

### ***Section One, Chapters 1 – 8***

These chapters introduce Rick as he is applying for his teaching job in the East End. This section ends with a significant event—an experience with the students that marks a turning point in Rick’s approach to teaching them.

1. In the novel’s opening section, the narrator vividly describes Rick’s first impressions of London’s East End: its inhabitants, its appearance, and its smells (pp. 5-10).

What does he think of the charwomen (cleaning women) who ride the bus with him? What do they appear to think of him? A slim, smartly dressed woman refuses to take the empty seat next to him. How does he respond to her? What do his responses—to the various women and East End itself—reveal about his own social class? What is his attitude toward obvious racial prejudice? How does he feel? How does he act?

Have you ever been in a situation when someone made it very clear that he or she did not want to associate with you in any way (sit, talk, or perhaps work with you)? How did you feel? How did you act?

2. Racial insults can be thinly disguised as humor. On page 15, when Rick enters the staffroom of the school where he is interviewing for a teaching position, a teacher—Weston—jokingly says, “Ah, another lamb to the slaughter” (obviously joking about the job), but follows this with, “or shall we say, black sheep?”

Notice again how Rick feels and acts in response to prejudice. Do you begin to see a pattern? Why is it especially hard to accuse someone of insulting you if they do so with a joke? (You can probably imagine what they would say if you accused them: “But I was only.....”)

3. At the heart of Mr. Florian’s attitude toward his teaching staff are complementary beliefs in individualism and meritocracy, that is that one can succeed through hard work and advance both economically and socially. This is evident in his comments to Rick: “From the moment you accept, you’re on your own...Success or failure with them [the students] will depend entirely on you” (p. 31)

Review his discussion of Greenslade’s students on pp. 28-30: how do his beliefs apply (or not apply) to them? What appear to be the aspirations of the students in this novel? What do the other teachers think of the students’ potential? Is the attitude of the teachers toward the students’ potential important to their success? Why or why not? How did the attitudes of your own teachers toward your abilities and potential affect you?

4. Rick is a well-trained, highly educated communications engineer who has applied for, and accepted, a teaching position.

How does he view his new job (pp. 32-33)? Why? What are the forces that led him to his this line of work? Can teaching really be just a job? Or is it more appropriate to consider it a calling? Notice as you read further—how does the novel as a whole address this question? Consider your own possible career choices: do you see your future work as just a job or as something more?

On page 37, in an interview prior to applying for the teaching position, Rick is told that he cannot be hired for an engineering position—one for which he is certainly qualified for—because it would mean putting him in a position of authority over some of the long-standing English employees. Why is that a problem? What had Rick “forgotten” while serving in the air force?

5. Explore further the social, cultural, political, and economic values that make up the British Way of Life (pp. 38-41). How do these differ for blacks and whites? What is it like for a colonial “Brit,” particularly someone who is not white, to come to Britain? How does Rick explain the British stereotype of a black man on page 41? What, by way of contrast, is the American Way of Life? Is it the same for all races in America?

6. Rick is profoundly revolted and angered by the behavior of his students when he finds the dirty sanitary napkin smoldering in the classroom fireplace grate (pp. 70-71). What link does he make between their behavior and their social class? How is this incident a turning point of the novel?

***Section Two, Chapters 9-17***

Read this section to follow Rick's progress with the students as he forges a new direction. Can he have any success in changing the deeply entrenched behaviors and prejudices of the students' backgrounds?

7. On pages 72-73 Rick says to his students, "Most of you will be leaving school within six months or so; that means that in a short while you will be embarked on the very adult business of earning a living. Bearing that in mind, I have decided that from now on you will be treated, not a children, but as young men and women, by me and by each other. When we move out of the state of childhood certain standards of conduct are expected of us."

The students in *To Sir with Love* are soon to graduate to an adult place in life. You have just done so. What new standards of conduct do you anticipate you will now be expected of in relation to 1. Academic life, 2. Dorm life, 3. Relations with your family, 3. Relations with your old friends, 4. Social life?

8. In Chapter 12, page 91, Rick is on a "field trip" with the high school age students he teaches. While waiting for a train, two elderly women look in their direction and mutter something about shameless young white girls and black men. Are Rick's feelings and actions consistent with earlier episodes of prejudice? How would you feel and act? Who responds differently from him to this incident?
9. In chapter 13 Rick visits a home where there is a room advertised for rent (page 101). As soon as the woman of the house sees him, she says that the room is not for rent. Unfortunately, one of his students lives in this home and is terribly embarrassed to find that her mother has treated him this way. This girl, Barbara Pegg, is typical of Rick's other students who come to accept him, despite the prejudices of their community.

Why, do you suppose, his students feel differently about Rick than others in the community do—the smartly-dressed woman on the bus, the employers, Weston, and Pegg's mother? On page 103, Barbara's mother visits Rick to say she's changed her mind and that he can rent the room. Do you think she is sincere? Why did she change her mind?

10. The students in Rick’s class have lived their lives in a small, closed community. Rick hopes to expand their horizons by taking them to the Victoria and Albert Museum, to Sadler and Wells for a performance of *Coppelia*, to the Old Vic to see Laurence Olivier in *Hamlet*, and to Wembley Stadium to see the Harlem Globetrotters. You too have come to Keuka from a place you are very familiar with. What plans do you have to expand your own horizons in college?

***Section Three, Chapters 18-22***

This section marks the ending of the story, but it comes with painful experiences for both Rick, a woman teacher, and the students. Relationships formed at school are tested in the larger community. How do they fare?

11. In Chapter 18, Rick is on a date with a fellow woman teacher, Gillian, who is very fond of him. Gillian has invited Rick to eat with her at an elegant restaurant on her birthday.

How are they treated? How does Gillian respond? How does Gillian feel about Rick’s reactions? Have you ever been the target of prejudice? Have you ever been with a friend who was the target of prejudiced actions or words? Did you feel and respond more like Rick or more like Gillian?

12. In what ways does Rick develop a different understanding of social class? Contrast pp.5-10 with p. 151. What has changed about Rick’s attitude? How do you expect you will interact with people of different social classes?
13. What overall message does the book make on the issue of social mobility? What kind of work do the students anticipate upon graduation? What are the obstacles to economic and social advancement as presented in the novel? Can these be successfully overcome through hard work? Consider the challenges you will face as you seek to improve your socioeconomic status: to what degree will hard work be sufficient to overcome these?
14. Two events occur in Chapter 20 give additional information about Rick’s struggles with prejudice:

Early in the chapter reporters and photographers from the newspaper come to the school. What do they want from Rick? What is his response? Do you agree with his response?

Further on in this chapter (p. 169) an event occurs that makes Rick question all that he had done with the students to this point—he feels that they are like the strangers he encounters on buses and trains who see only skins, not the people in those skins. What is the resolution of this as the chapter concludes? What is the relationship between “stranger” and “prejudice” in your opinion? What role does a school community have in that relationship? What role should it have?

15. At the end of the book (pages 181-182 Rick states, “I tried to show them that people were not confined to any geographical location because of their color, but that there could be found people of every racial strain in all parts of the world. Once there, wherever it was, they could get along with each other if they really wanted to. It is not necessary for them to do anything special for a Negro or Indian, or any other person, but simply to behave to them as to a strange Briton, without favor or malevolence, but with the courtesy and gentleness which every human being should give to and expect from each other.”

What different groups do you anticipate meeting at Keuka College? How will this quote from the book help you to respond to people you may not have had any contact with before?