

DIY DISCUSSION GUIDE

MAKE YOUR ONE BOOK, ONE COMMUNITY DISCUSSION A BIG SUCCESS

First time leading a book discussion? Have you led book discussions but are looking for some ideas to breathe new life into your group? We have some tips to help make your discussion of *The Violin Conspiracy* by Brendan Slocumb a success.

- **Make it fun.** Keep it casual by enjoying food and drinks, even if you discuss virtually.
- **Help newcomers feel comfortable and welcome.** Be sure everyone knows each other's name and spend a few minutes getting to know one another before discussing the book.
- **Go off-script.** Feel free to skip questions or ask them in a different order based on the members of your group and how you think they'll participate. If your group was really interested in one aspect of the book, feel free to focus on that. Ask your own questions to dive deeper and let other members ask questions, too.
- **Pause.** Give members time to think and answer before you jump in with your own answer to every question.
- **Be respectful of different opinions, responses, and reactions to the book.** Diverse viewpoints make the discussion more interesting and rich.

A SUMMARY OF *THE VIOLIN CONSPIRACY*

(from <https://www.brendanslocumb.com/>) The riveting story of a young Black musician who discovers that his old family fiddle is actually a priceless Stradivarius: when it's stolen on the eve of the world's most prestigious classical music competition, he risks everything to get it back.

Growing up Black in rural North Carolina, Ray McMillian's life is already mapped out. But Ray has a gift and a dream—he's determined to become a world-class professional violinist, and nothing will stand in his way. Not his mother, who wants him to stop making such a racket; not the fact that he can't afford a violin suitable to his talents; not even the racism inherent in the world of classical music.

When he discovers that his beat-up, family fiddle is actually a priceless Stradivarius, all his dreams suddenly seem within reach, and together, Ray and his violin take the world by storm. But on the eve of the renowned and cutthroat Tchaikovsky Competition—the Olympics of classical music—the violin is stolen, a ransom note for five million dollars left in its place. Without it, Ray feels like he's lost a piece of himself. As the competition approaches, Ray must not only reclaim his precious violin, but prove to himself—and the world—that no matter the outcome, there has always been a truly great musician within him.

Contact the Fiction desk at (847) 923-3140 to arrange to pick up of a copy of the book, or or checkout the eBook from Libby or the eAudiobook from Libby with your Schaumburg Library card.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about underrepresented communities (BIPOC etc.) performing in the classical music world? What do you believe the solution to the disparaging numbers of musicians of color in major symphony orchestras is?
2. Ray knows he is an excellent violinist without the Strad, and he would never sell it for money; why, then, is getting the Strad back such an all-consuming objective for him? Why do you think the Marks family felt so entitled to the violin?
3. Ray also finds light in Janice, his mentor. What do you think Ray might have done differently if Janice hadn't approached him about music school, especially given his mother's influence? How important are mentors in his situation? Can you describe the mentors in your own life?

4. Ray's first experience with direct racial discrimination--where a person tells him his skin color means he deserves less--is connected to music. How do you think this affected his choices and trajectory as a musician? At the same time, Ray isn't a pushover; he calls people out on their prejudices. What message does this get across to readers?
5. Race is important in the novel, but Nicole's race is never discussed. Why is that?
6. Ray had every excuse to reject the world that rejects him at every turn--particularly the family members who didn't believe in him. Why does he instead endeavor to take his grandmother's advice of staying sweet to heart? Whenever Ray is challenged, he returns to the memory of his Grandma Nora in her pink house coat. What do you think of this?
7. Ray's mother doesn't want him to go to college or succeed in any way. Do you know people like this? How real did she seem as a character?
8. The author uses the novel to explore what it means to do what you love – but you might often be discouraged, whether by discrimination, societal expectation, or the simple fear it will never be enough. What are your thoughts on this?
9. Did this book change you at all? Now that you've read it, do you have any new perspectives as a result of reading this story?
10. Do you agree or disagree with these quotes by Ray from the book, and why?
 - Alone, we are a solitary violin, a lonely flute, a trumpet singing in the dark. Together, we are a symphony.
 - The one student who didn't look like or play like everyone else, got the most out of my session. That's why I am here. I gave that young man what no one else was willing to: a chance.
 - You work twice as hard. Even three times. For the rest of your life. It's not fair, but that's how it is. Some people will always see you as less than they are. So, you have to be twice as good as them.

Adapted from questions on: [BrendanSlocumb.com](https://www.brendanslocumb.com)

BRENDAN SLOCUMB BIO

Brendan Nicholas Slocumb was raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a degree in music education, with concentrations on Violin and Viola. For the past two decades, he has been a public and private school music educator from kindergarten through twelfth grade, teaching general music, orchestra, and guitar ensembles. His students were often chosen for district and regional orchestras. In 2005, Brendan was named Teacher of the Year for Robert E. Lee High School; he has been named to the Who's Who of American teachers and is a Nobel Teacher of Distinction. Brendan also serves as an educational consultant for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Music has always played a major part in Brendan's life. He believes that it's a life-saving force and a gift we should always offer our children. When he was nine, he started playing violin through a public school music program. Friends he grew up with are today sitting in jail; when they were out running the streets, he was in rehearsals. When they were breaking into people's houses, he was practicing Dvorak and Mozart. His violin opened the door to opportunity, and he ran through it. Since then, Brendan has performed with the Washington Metropolitan Symphony, the McLean Symphony, the Prince George's Philharmonic, and the Alexandria Symphony. He has served as the concertmaster for the NOVA-Annandale Symphony Orchestra and regularly performs chamber music with members of the Alexandria Chamber Music Society. He maintains a private music studio teaching lessons to students on violin, guitar, and piano. Brendan believes that everyone can learn to appreciate and love music and that it can be a new way of communicating, building bonds, and connecting with people who may look, sound, or speak differently.

The Violin Conspiracy is his first novel, published in 2022.

Bio adapted from [BrendanSlocumb.com](https://www.brendanslocumb.com)

ALSO BY BRENDAN SLOCUMB

Symphony of Secrets (2023)

The Dark Maestro (coming out on May 13, 2025)

READ-ALIKES

The Bridgetower Sonata: Sonata Mulattica by Emmanuel Boundzéli Dongala

The Final Revival of Opal and Nev by Dawnie Walton

The Ensemble by Aja Gabel

Hell of a Book by Jason Mott

The Weight by Jeff Boyd

HISTORY OF THE STRADIVARIUS VIOLIN

Considered the greatest violins ever made, Stradivarius violins have been handcrafted by master luthier Antonio Stradivari. Stradivari was believed to have been born in Cremona, Italy in 1644. He reached prominence within his lifetime and has gained even more admiration and recognition since his death more than 250 years ago. Stradivari designed and crafted more than 1,000 violins and instruments during his lifetime, nearly 650 of which still exist today. These violins and instruments are considered the finest ever made and continue to be the standard in form, sound and beauty.

The earliest known Stradivarius violin was made in 1666, when Stradivari was only twenty-two. Some believe that he was the apprentice of Nicolo Amati, the grandson of violin maker Andrea Amati (1511-1577). Another implication is that he was a woodworker by trade, which would explain his genius talent in design and drafting.

Stradivari continued to craft unmatched instruments into his late 70s. He continued to handcraft instruments until his death in 1737. Today, artisans and scientists still try to recreate what can only be the beauty and sound of a Stradivarius instrument. Stradivarius violins and instruments are prized possessions housed in museums and personal collections around the world.

Information obtained and adapted from <https://www.stradivarius.org/stradivarius-violins/>

RELEVANT WEBSITES

Brendan Slocumb author site:
<https://www.brendanslocumb.com/>

The Violin Conspiracy Spotify Music Playlist:
<https://www.brendanslocumb.com/my-playlist>

The International Tchaikovsky Competition website:
<https://tchaikovskycompetition.com/en/>

Smithsonian Online Exhibit for Stradivarius Violins:
<http://bit.ly/3A6yA6S>

Stradivarius Violins vs. Other Concert Violin Models:

<https://www.thestrad.com/lutherie/blind-tested-soloists-unable-to-tell-stradivarius-violins-from-modern-instruments/994.article>

<https://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/20175/21158/>

San Francisco Classical Voice Free Glossary of Musical Terms:

<https://www.sfcv.org/learn/glossary>

Classic FM Article: *25 Black Musicians Who Have Shaped the Classical Music World*

(some of the musicians and composers Ray mentioned in the book can be found here):

<https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/black-musicians-pioneering-classical-music/>

Indiana University's Archives of African American Music and Culture:

<https://aaamc.indiana.edu/Collections>

NPR *Why is American Classical Music So White?* article:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2019/09/20/762514169/why-is-american-classical-music-so-white>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The four themes that we're exploring for this year's One Book, One Community are music, family, racism, and perseverance.

Here's how we're defining those terms:

Music: Vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion. Also, music can be defined as the art or science of composing and performing the written or printed signs representing vocal or instrumental sound.

Family: A group of people related to one another by blood or marriage or all the descendants of a common ancestor.

Racism: Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism by an individual, community, or institution against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

Perseverance: Persistence in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success.

GLOSSARY OF COMMON MUSICAL TERMS MENTIONED IN VIOLIN CONSPIRACY

Concertmaster: The first chair violinist of an orchestra is a vital musical leader with wide ranging responsibilities, from tuning the orchestra, to working on bowings in the string section, to working closely with the conductor. Also referred to as the first chair violin, first violinist, and concertmistress.

Concerto: A piece of instrumental music that contrasts a solo instrument or a small group of solo instruments with the main body of the orchestra.

Double stops/triple stops: The technique of playing two or three notes simultaneously on a stringed instrument such as a violin, a viola, a cello, or a double bass.

Harmonics: Violin techniques that involve producing high-pitched, airy overtone notes by lightly touching specific points on a violin string using the left-hand fingers while bowing with the right hand. By not pushing the string down to the fingerboard, the string actually vibrates on both sides of the finger.

Interval: In music an interval is the distance in pitch between two notes, counted from the lower note upwards, with the lower note as the first of the interval. The violin, for example, is tuned in intervals of a fifth, G to D, D to A and A to E, the double bass in fourths, from E to A, A to D and D to G.

Pizzicato: Pizzicato (Italian: plucked) is a direction to performers on string instruments to pluck the strings.

Positions on violin: Specific locations where a violinist's hand should hover in order to sound accurate pitches. Most violin music can be played using three positions: first position, second position, and third position. For example, third position is when the first finger is placed where the third finger would be in first position.

Rosin: A translucent amber-colored to almost black brittle friable resin that is obtained from the oleoresin or deadwood of pine trees. Rosin is applied to the bow in order to grip and create friction between the instrument strings.

Sonata: A composition for an instrumental soloist, often with piano accompaniment, typically in several movements.

Symphony: An elaborate instrumental composition in three or more movements, similar in form to a sonata but written for an orchestra and usually of far grander proportions and more varied elements.

Vibrato: Vibrato is a slight fluctuation in pitch that's used to create a warmth or richness of tone. On the violin, it is a left-hand technique; the effect is produced by rocking the finger from the wrist or arm.

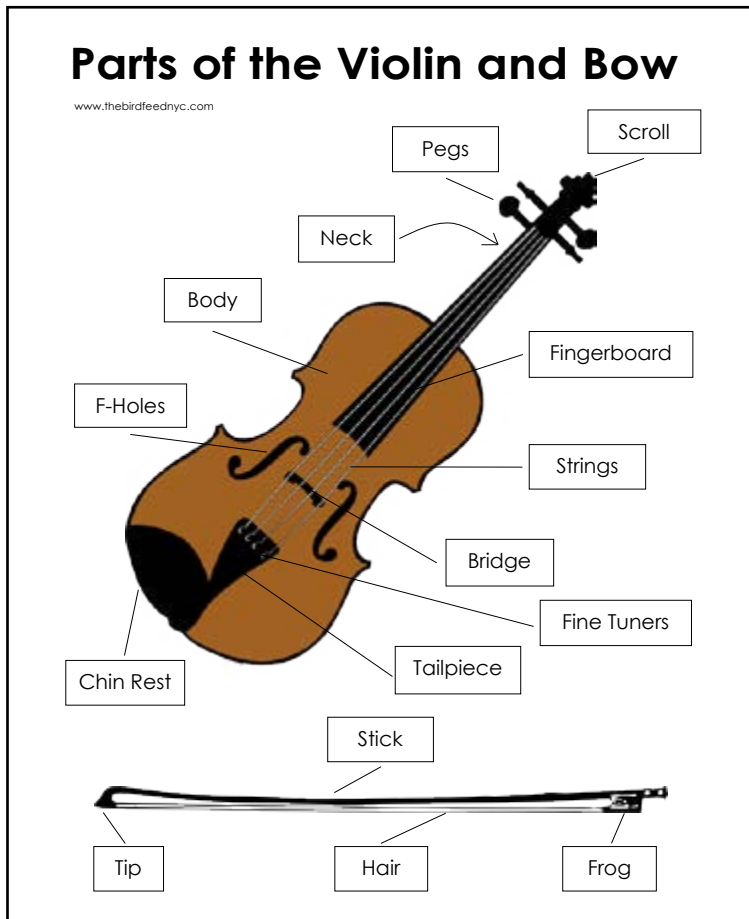


Diagram Source: <https://homeschoolgiveaways.com/free-violin-and-bow-printable/>