

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 Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett a success with this Do It Yourself Discussion Guide.

- **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.** Be sure to 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 VANISHING HALF*

This year's One Book, One Community title is #1 New York Times Bestseller *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett. A story of twin sisters growing up together in a small, Southern Black community and who run away at age 16, it's not just their daily lives that are different as adults, it's everything: their families, their communities, their racial identities. Years later, one sister lives with her daughter in that same small town. The other twin secretly passes for white. Still, even separated by so many miles and just as many lies, their fates remain intertwined as their own daughters' storylines intersect.

Contact the Fiction desk at (847) 923-3140 to arrange to pick up of a copy of the book, or checkout the [eBook from the Digital Library of Illinois](#), the [eBook from Axis360](#), the [eAudiobook from the Digital Library of Illinois](#) with your Schaumburg Library card.

Part of our [One Book, One Community](#), this discussion focuses on the themes of belonging, racism, family and identity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On a scale of 1-4 stars, how many stars would you give *The Vanishing Half* and why?
2. What word or phrase do you think best describes the book? Feel free to expand.
3. Stella and Desiree are close as children. Did you see their separation as inevitable, or something that could have been prevented? When did you first notice the division between them? What do you think caused it? (from Tailored Book Recommendations)
4. Why does Mallard represent so much pain for the twins? Discuss how injustice and secrecy affect the sisters as young girls, and how that carries over to their adult lives. (from Tailored Book Recommendations)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONT.)

5. How does the history of Mallard and its values affect the twins and their parents? How does it affect “outsiders” like Early and later Jude? Why do you think Desiree decides to return there as an adult? What does the depiction of Mallard say about who belongs to what communities, and how those communities are formed and enforced? (from Penguin Random House Reader’s Guide)
6. Why do you think Stella made the choice she did? What did Stella have to give up in order to live a different kind of life? Was it necessary to leave Desiree behind? Do you think Stella ultimately regrets her choices? What about Desiree? (from Penguin Random House Reader’s Guide)
7. Compare and contrast Kennedy and Jude. How do their differences highlight the role privilege plays in a person’s life? How are their lives similar? How do their relationships with their respective mothers differ?
8. Many of the characters are engaged in a kind of performance. Kennedy makes a profession of acting, and ultimately her fans blur the line between performance and reality when they confuse her with her soap opera character. Barry performs on stage in theatrical costumes that he then removes for his daytime life. Reese takes on a new wardrobe and role, but it isn’t a costume. One could say that Stella’s whole marriage and neighborhood life is a kind of performance. What is the author saying about the roles we perform in the world? (from Penguin Random House Reader’s Guide)
9. Desiree’s job as a fingerprint analyst in Washington, D.C. is to use scientific methods to identify people through physical, genetic details. Why do you think the author chose this as a profession for her character? Where else do you see this theme of identity and identification in the book? (from Penguin Random House Reader’s Guide)
10. Compare and contrast the love relationships in the novel –Desiree and Early, Stella and Blake, and Reese and Jude. How much does telling the truth or obscuring it play a part in the functionality of a relationship? How much does the past matter in each case? (from Penguin Random House Reader’s Guide)
11. What does Stella feel she has to lose if she reveals her true identity to her family and her community? When Loretta, a Black woman, moves in across the street, what does she represent for Stella? What do Stella’s interactions with Loretta tell us about Stella’s commitment to her new identity? (from Penguin Random House Reader’s Guide)
12. Many family relationships are depicted in the book including twins, parent-child, cousins and mother-daughter. What defines a family based on how some of these relationships are depicted in the book?
13. What is your response to Brit Bennett’s writing style? Were there sentences, phrases or sections that stood out to you?
14. Share if you listened to the audio version of the book. What did you think of the narration?
15. Have you read *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett? If so, what did you think of the book? Do you want to read *The Mothers* after reading *The Vanishing Half*?
16. What will you remember about *The Vanishing Half*? How did the book affect you as a reader?
17. What do you think is the significance of the title? Who or what is the vanishing half?
18. What questions do you have for the author? You can submit online for her to answer at her visit on February 24.

BRIT BENNETT BIO

When Brit Bennett's debut novel *The Mothers* was published in the fall of 2016, critics and readers were immediately dazzled by this exciting new voice in literary fiction. Bennett was named a 5 Under 35 honoree by the National Book Foundation and the book was longlisted for the NBCC John Leonard First Novel Prize and the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction.

The Mothers is a surprising story about young love and the things that ultimately haunt us most. Set within a contemporary Black community in Southern California, Bennett's first novel is an emotionally perceptive story about ambition, community and love.

In the *New York Times* #1 bestseller and Good Morning America June Book Club pick, *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett returns the readers to California for another emotionally perceptive story. This engrossing page-turner explores the lasting influence of the past as it shapes a person's decisions, desires and expectations. In her talks and her work, she examines the role writing plays in documenting racial injustice and contemporary Black experience.

Before publishing her novel, Brit Bennett had already built an impressive platform as a social commentator. Her essay in *Jezebel*, following the Ferguson riots, was shared over a million times. Since then, she has been invited to write several op-eds in the *New York Times*, and appeared on NPR's The Brian Lehrer show. Her work has also been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Paris Review*.

ALSO BY BRIT BENNETT

The Mothers (2016)

RELEVANT WEBSITES

Brit Bennett Author site

britbennett.com

Good Morning America Interview

<https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/video/author-brit-bennett-talks-book-vanishing-half-71400014>

NPR Author Interview

<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/05/870303515/brit-bennett-set-her-novel-50-years-ago-she-didnt-expect-it-to-be-timely>

Penguin Random House Book Club Kit

<https://sites.prh.com/tvhbookclub>

READ ALIKES

Silver Sparrow by Tayari Jones

Passing by Nella Larsen

A Kind of Freedom by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton

The Nickel Boys by Colson Whitehead

Red at the Bone by Jacqueline Woodson

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The four themes that we're exploring for this year's One Book, One Community are belonging, racism, family and identity. Here's how we're defining those and other related themes:

Belonging: The human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group.

Racism: Prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership in a particular minority or marginalized racial or ethnic group.

Colorism: Prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.

Family: The ties that exist between people united by marriage, blood, adoption or strong connections.

Identity: The qualities, beliefs, personality, looks or expression that make up a person. A psychological identity relates to self-image, self-esteem and individuality.