

BOOK
CLUB
KIT

THE VANISHING HALF

a novel



BRIT
BENNETT

New York Times - bestselling author of *The Mothers*



DEAR READERS,

Thank you for your interest in *The Vanishing Half* for your book club. The spark for this novel first arrived to me one winter morning in 2015, while I was talking to my mother on the phone and she mentioned, offhandedly, a town she'd heard about when she was a child growing up in rural Louisiana. "It was a town where everyone intermarried so that their children would get lighter and lighter," she said. The idea sounded almost mythical to me, a town filled with Black people so obsessed with light skin that they would try to genetically engineer their population in pursuit of it. I began to imagine twin sisters born in a place like this whose lives diverge to opposite sides of the color line: one disappears to live as a white woman, the other mysteriously returns home with a dark-skinned daughter. As I wrote, the story expanded into the next generation, the twins' choices rippling through the lives of their own daughters, each one forced to reckon with the complicated secrets she has inherited. To me, this ultimately is a story about the liberation and pain of transformation. What do we gain and what do we lose in becoming someone new? I hope you'll immerse yourself in this story about family and identity and all the choices that we make to become who we are, and I hope you enjoy thinking about all of these issues with your book club.

—BRIT BENNETT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stella and Desiree Vignes grow up identical and, as children, inseparable. Later, they are not only separated, but lost to each other, completely out of contact. What series of events and experiences leads to this division and why? Is it inevitable, after their growing up so indistinct from each other?
2. When did you notice cracks between the twins begin to form? Do you understand why 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?
3. Consider the various forces that shape the twins into the people they become, and the forces that later shape their respective daughters. In the creation of an individual identity or sense of self, how much influence comes from upbringing, geography, race, gender, class, education? Which of these are mutable, and why? Have you ever taken on or discarded aspects of your own identity?
4. Kennedy is born with everything handed to her, Jude with comparatively little. What impact do their relative privileges have on the people they become? How does it affect their relationships with their mothers and their understanding of home? How does it influence the dynamic between them?
5. The town of Mallard is small but looms large in the personal histories of its residents. How does the history of this town and its values affect the twins and their parents; how does it affect “outsiders” like Early and, eventually, Jude? Do you understand why 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?
6. Many of the characters are engaged in a kind of performance at some point in the story. 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 onstage in theatrical costumes that he removes for his daytime life. Reese takes on a new wardrobe and role, but it isn't a costume. Stella's whole marriage and neighborhood life are a sort of performance. What is the author saying about the roles we perform in the world? Do you ever feel you are performing a role rather than being yourself? How does that compare with what the novel's these characters are doing? Consider the distinction among performance, reinvention, and transformation in respect to the various characters in the book.
7. Desiree's job as a fingerprint analyst in Washington D.C., involves using 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?
8. Compare and contrast the love relationships in the novel—Desiree and Early, Stella and Blake, Reese and Jude. What are the characters' separate relationships with the truth? How much does telling the truth or obscuring it play a part in the functioning of a relationship? How much does the past matter in each case?
9. What does Stella feel she has to lose in California, if she reveals her true identity to her family and her community? What does Loretta, the Black woman who moves in across the street, represent for Stella? What do her interactions with Loretta tell us about Stella's commitment to her new identity?



IN CONVERSATION WITH BRIT BENNETT

For complete transcripts of the interviews the following text is adapted from, please visit [*Vanity Fair*, *Medium*, and *Goodreads*](#).

Q: A lot of complicated female relationships steer this story—sister to sister, daughter to mother, cousins, friends. Why was it important to explore those bonds and relationships in the novel? (*Goodreads*)

A: Those are my favorite types of stories. I love stories about women taking care of each other or women failing to take care of each other. I love the complexity of those relationships. I think it's because I grew up with two sisters and it was me, my sisters, my mom, and my dad as the only guy in the house. I grew up in this world of women.

My most important friendships have been with my girlfriends. I'm always interested in how relationships between women and among women can be so complicated and intense. I wrote my first book, [*The Mothers*] about the intensity of these friendships. It's about a chosen sisterhood, in a way. And this book is about a biological sisterhood and the strains of that relationship. I've come to see these patterns in my work, and I've started to embrace them. This is what I'm interested in as a writer.

Q: The book looks at two twins, who choose to “pass” as different races. What do you want to illuminate about their choices in this environment? (*Medium*)

A: These twins are raised sort of identically under the same circumstances. But they eventually make choices that are so dramatically different, and that not only affect their own lives but also trickle down to the lives of their children and future generations.

I was interested in those choices, in transformation, and what it means to choose to be somebody else, through the lens of race, and in the way these twins end up living their adult lives on different sides of the color line. But I also just wanted to answer the question: How do we all become who we are?

Q: In *The Vanishing Half*, you start from a small community in history and then the scale becomes much bigger. Why are you drawn to documenting social interactions among small groups? (*Vanity Fair*)

A: For *The Mothers*, I was writing about the place that I came from, Oceanside, which is, to be fair, a larger town than it seems, but that to me is what it felt like. It felt small and claustrophobic and very local, and I was interested in that. As far as Mallard, [the town where parts of *The Vanishing Half* are set], I was interested in my mom's coming from a small town in rural Louisiana—I think she said there were eighty-four people in her graduating class—versus my dad's growing up in L.A. They both have very different experiences of Blackness, rural versus urban. They both grew up in impoverished households, but their experiences of that were different. I don't know if it's writing towards my family, in a way, or growing up in a town that's almost stifling that made me really interested in a small community.

Q: Eventually, Stella reinvents herself outside of the small Black community she comes from, but it comes at great personal cost even though the people around her claim not to be racist. How did her passing as a white woman come to represent that for you? (*Vanity Fair*)

A: When I thought about Stella passing, I kept thinking about the kind of person she would marry and the kind of community she would live in as a white woman. Maybe that's why I landed on putting her in a relationship with this self-described moderate. It's not like in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, where the character is married to a loud and proud bigot. In that case it's like, "Oh, my God, what's going to happen if he discovers that his wife is actually Black!" That was one path that was available. But for me, there was something more interesting about Stella marrying this guy who is kind of a coastal elite and who thinks "I'm not one of those southern white people." He'd never burn a cross on a lawn, but at the same time, would he lawyer up if a Black family tried to move into their California neighborhood? Yes. He uses every resource available to him.

When Stella's husband, Blake, and that community she's a part of, when they're looking at videos of urban unrest in 1968, and they would never want to associate themselves with the KKK. They would never want to associate themselves with this behavior that they consider classless. At the same time, they still subscribe to this white supremacy, and endorse it and support it. I didn't want to write about history in a way that allowed people to read it and think, "Oh this has nothing to do with us." I wanted them to possibly see themselves and the people they love within these characters and these beliefs.

Q: What do you think people might gather from reading *The Vanishing Half*, which touches down during the civil rights movement and is ultimately a reflection on race and identity? (*Medium*)

A: When I started the book four or five years ago, I did not imagine that it would be described as timely. It's been surreal to hear the book discussed in that way.

I wanted to begin in this kind of moment of unrest, beginning in the wake of Dr. King's assassination and all the protests, because it's also a moment of emotional unrest for the twins at the time. It's a huge moment of great historical significance and unrest. And one of them is about to leave her abusive marriage, while the other is experiencing a crisis when a Black family is threatening to move into her white neighborhood.

So I liked layering that. I think readers might see some parallels between now and 1968. Although this moment does feel different.

Q: *The Vanishing Half* asks readers to think about race in an entirely different way from what Americans are used to. Was there a takeaway that you wanted for your readers? (Goodreads)

A: As a writer, I'm more interested in asking questions than answering them. And certainly, people far more intelligent than I tackle questions of race as a function of politics and history and not science.

There is so much that is complicated about race. It's far more complex than our binary way of thinking about it. What makes somebody Black and what makes somebody white is not necessarily the way people look. It's not really the way they are brought up or where they grew up. But when people hear that something is a "construct," they may assume it's fake ; perhaps that's true as far as race not being biological, but however we determine these categories, they have real effects on people's lives.

There's something haunting about these categories that we organize our society around. The categories themselves are unstable, yet they can determine the course that our lives take, at least partially.

Q: This is a fascinating and compelling story with a mystery at its center that also has plenty going on thematically. It's about family, identity and gender identity, race, truth, obligation. What was the first idea that pulled you into the story? (Goodreads)

A: It really started for me a few years ago, and it came from a conversation with my mom in which she mentioned a town she remembered from her childhood in Louisiana where, as she put it, everyone married so their children would get lighter and lighter.

You know how your parents say things that are matter-of-fact to them but are shocking to you? She mentioned it quite casually, and I was like, "Wait, wait, go back to that." It was so striking to me, the idea of a whole community being structured around skin color. It was such an interesting concept, but a concept is not the same as a novel, of course.

So, I started thinking beyond that. What would it be like to leave this place and then return? I started thinking about these twins whose lives take them in very different directions, but who both originate from this same community. Twins are kind of a natural way to write about identity because they're so relevant to the question of what makes me me and what makes you you.

Q: Some have called your book kind of an escape. What do you hope readers get from it right now? (Medium)

A: Many people who recently read it have said, "I read this book in quarantine and it was such a good distraction." That's what we all could use now, distraction from this difficult period that we've all been living through.

There are a lot of different locations, so readers can vicariously travel through these characters as they're going to different parts of the country. I hope readers connect to the relationships in the novel as well, and get swept up in the love stories, whether they involve family, romantic couples, friends, or something else.

THE VANISHING HALF COCKTAIL

This cocktail and its ingredients are representative of *The Vanishing Half* and the life of the Vignes sisters. The bourbon and peach flavor profiles represents southern roots, balanced with the orange citrus that California is so famous for. The red wine float creates a stark visual contrast, and although there appears to be a separation in the cocktail, it's all still perfectly balanced.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 oz. bourbon
- 3/4 oz. peach syrup
- 1 oz. orange juice
- 1/2 oz. lemon juice
- Fresh peach slice and lemon twist (for garnish)
- Red wine
(*recommendation: a dry red, such as a Malbec*)

PREP STEPS

- Combine all ingredients, except for the wine, into a cocktail shaker and add ice.
- Shake to chill the drink, then strain it into a rocks glass over ice.
- Pour 1 oz red wine over the back of a bar spoon (or kitchen spoon) into the cocktail to achieve a float.
- Garnish with a peach wedge and lemon twist.





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