

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Born and raised in Southern California, Brit Bennett graduated from Stanford University and later earned her MFA in fiction at the University of Michigan, where she won a Hopwood Award in Graduate Short Fiction as well as the 2014 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers. Her work is featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, and *Jezebel*.

- [Author's website](#)

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? Was 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 do you think 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 in size 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 later 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 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? Do you ever feel you are performing a role rather than being yourself? How does that compare to what some of these characters are doing? Consider the distinction between performance, reinvention, and transformation in respect to the different characters in the book.
7. Desiree’s job as a fingerprint analyst in Washington DC 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?
8. Compare and contrast the love relationships in the novel –Desiree and Early, Stella and Blake, and Reese and Jude. What are their separate relationships with the truth? 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?
9. What does Stella feel she has to lose in California, 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?
10. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, moving? Why or why not?
11. Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story. Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above?
12. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/576782/the-vanishing-half-by-brit-bennett/9780525536291/readers-guide/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

/ Starred Review */* In 1968, Desiree Vignes returns to her Louisiana hometown more than a decade after she and her twin sister, Stella, vanished overnight as teens. Her companion for this flight is her young daughter, Jude, with skin so dark it shocks locals. The twins' ancestor, the freed son of an enslaver, founded Mallard, ""a town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated like Negroes."" Still bruised by the husband she fled, Desiree is in survival mode when the man hired to find her decides to help her find Stella, whom no one has heard from in years, instead. Spanning decades, the story travels to UCLA with teenage Jude, unknowingly nearing Stella's world. Cloistered in her Brentwood subdivision, Stella shares nothing of her early life with her husband and teenage daughter, Kennedy, and fiercely protects the presumed whiteness that became the foundation for her entire, carefully constructed life. Reflecting and refracting her story via the four related women—sisters, cousins, mothers, daughters—at its heart, and with an irresistible narrative voice, Bennett (*The Mothers*, 2016) writes an intergenerational epic of race and reinvention, love and inheritance, divisions made and crossed, binding trauma, and the ever-present past. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: *The Mothers* was a best-selling, award-winning debut, and anticipation for Bennett's second novel has been rising steadily. -- Annie Bostrom (Reviewed 4/15/2020) (Booklist, vol 116, number 16, p35).

Publisher's Weekly

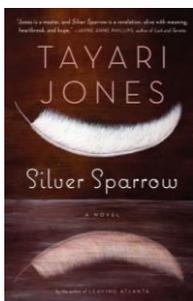
/ Starred Review */* Bennett (*The Mothers*) explores a Louisiana family's navigation of race, from the Jim Crow era through the 1980s, in this impressive work. The Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, were born and raised in Mallard, La., the slave-born founder of which imagined a town with "each generation lighter than the one before." In the early 1940s, when the twins are little, they witness their father's lynching, and as they come of age, they harbor ambitions to get out. Desiree, the more headstrong sister, leads Stella to New Orleans when they are 16, and after a few months, the quiet, studious Stella, who once dreamt of enrolling in an HBCU, disappears one night. In 1968, 14 years later, still with no word from Stella, Desiree is back in Mallard with her eight-year-old daughter, Jude, having left her abusive ex-husband. When Jude is older, she makes her own escape from Mallard to attend college in Los Angeles. At a party, Jude glimpses a woman who looks exactly like Desiree—except she couldn't be, because this woman is white. Eventually, the Vignes twins reunite, reckoning with the decisions that have shaped their lives. Effortlessly switching between the voices of Desiree, Stella, and their daughters, Bennett renders her characters and their struggles with great compassion, and explores the complicated state of mind that Stella finds herself in while passing as white. This prodigious follow-up surpasses Bennett's formidable debut. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 03/02/2020) (Publishers Weekly, vol 267, issue 9, p).

Kirkus Reviews

/ Starred Review */* Inseparable identical twin sisters ditch home together, and then one decides to vanish. The talented Bennett fuels her fiction with secrets—first in her lauded debut, *The Mothers* (2016), and now in the assured and magnetic story of the Vignes sisters, light-skinned women parked on opposite sides of the color line. Desiree, the "fidgety twin," and Stella, "a smart, careful girl," make their break from stultifying rural Mallard, Louisiana, becoming 16-year-old runaways in 1954 New Orleans. The novel opens 14 years later as Desiree, fleeing

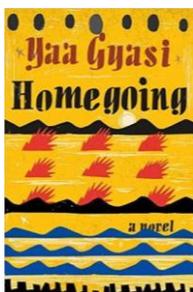
a violent marriage in D.C., returns home with a different relative: her 8-year-old daughter, Jude. The gossips are agog: “In Mallard, nobody married dark....Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far.” Desiree's decision seals Jude’s misery in this “colorstruck” place and propels a new generation of flight: Jude escapes on a track scholarship to UCLA. Tending bar as a side job in Beverly Hills, she catches a glimpse of her mother’s doppelgänger. Stella, ensconced in white society, is shedding her fur coat. Jude, so black that strangers routinely stare, is unrecognizable to her aunt. All this is expertly paced, unfurling before the book is half finished; a reader can guess what is coming. Bennett is deeply engaged in the unknowability of other people and the scourge of colorism. The scene in which Stella adopts her white persona is a tour de force of doubling and confusion. It calls up Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the book’s 50-year-old antecedent. Bennett's novel plays with its characters' nagging feelings of being incomplete—for the twins without each other; for Jude’s boyfriend, Reese, who is trans and seeks surgery; for their friend Barry, who performs in drag as Bianca. Bennett keeps all these plot threads thrumming and her social commentary crisp. In the second half, Jude spars with her cousin Kennedy, Stella's daughter, a spoiled actress. Kin “[find] each other’s lives inscrutable” in this rich, sharp story about the way identity is formed. (Kirkus Reviews, April 1, 2020).

READALIKES



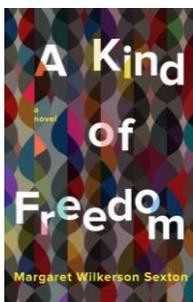
***Silver Sparrow* by Tayari Jones**

In 1980s Atlanta, James Witherspoon is living a double life. He has two families, a public one and a secret one. When the daughters from each family become friends, James' secrets are revealed and lives are changed forever.



***Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi**

Two half-sisters, unknown to each other, are born into different villages in 18th-century Ghana and experience profoundly different lives and legacies throughout subsequent generations marked by wealth, slavery, war, coal mining, the Great Migration and the realities of 20th-century Harlem.



***A Kind of Freedom* by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton**

Explores the legacy of racial disparity in the South through the story of three generations of an African American family in New Orleans.