



Book Club Set

The Other Black Girl

By Zakiya Dalila Harris

About the Author

Zakiya Dalila Harris received her MFA in creative writing from The New School. Her debut novel, *The Other Black Girl*, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller. Her essays and book reviews have appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband.

Retrieved from: <https://www.simonandschuster.ca/authors/Zakiya-Dalila-Harris/174702915>

About the Book

Urgent, propulsive, and sharp as a knife, *The Other Black Girl* is an electric debut about the tension that unfurls when two young Black women meet against the starkly white backdrop of New York City book publishing.

Twenty-six-year-old editorial assistant Nella Rogers is tired of being the only Black employee at Wagner Books. Fed up with the isolation and microaggressions, she's thrilled when Harlem-born and bred Hazel starts working in the cubicle beside hers. They've only just started comparing natural hair care regimens, though, when a string of uncomfortable events elevates Hazel to Office Darling, and Nella is left in the dust.

Then the notes begin to appear on Nella's desk: LEAVE WAGNER. NOW.

It's hard to believe Hazel is behind these hostile messages. But as Nella starts to spiral and obsess over the sinister forces at play, she soon realizes that there's a lot more at stake than just her career.

A whip-smart and dynamic thriller and sly social commentary that is perfect for anyone who has ever felt manipulated, threatened, or overlooked in the workplace, *The Other Black Girl* will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very last twist.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the author set this novel in the book publishing industry? How would the story unfold in another setting? How would it be similar or different?
2. Recalling Colin Franklin's novel, *Needles and Pins*, have you ever read a book that was problematic? What was the title and what made it problematic? Why do you think it was able to get published? Was Nella right about confronting Colin about the stereotypes in *Needles and Pins*?
3. At what point in the story did you feel suspicious of Hazel? What made her more likable to people in the office?
4. The code question to enter the Resistance is, if an asteroid crashes into the Earth and destroys all Black folk except one, who do you save: Stacey Dash or Ben Carson? Why do you think the author chose Stacey and Ben specifically? Would they be considered OBGs? How would you answer the code question and why?
5. How do you feel about Nella and Owen's relationship? Does he truly understand the microaggressions Nella experiences at work? Do you think she feels guilt or insecurities about having a boyfriend who is white?
6. Nella appears to be embarrassed by her inability to tie scarves, and about not making Black friends sooner or joining a Black sorority in college. Why does Nella question her Blackness? Do you think she's too hard on herself?
7. Why do you think the author wanted to highlight how Black women feel competitive toward one another in white corporate America? How do you think people feel when they are the only person of color at work? Why might people of color feel competitive in white work spaces?
8. In the novel, Diana and Kendra Rae posed for a 1980s magazine article titled "A New Era in Publishing?" How has publishing changed since the '80s? Consider the kinds of books that are published today. Are we currently in a new era of publishing?
9. What is Richard's role in the novel? Why is he threatened by Black women? How does he benefit from "fixing" Black women?
10. What does this book say about code-switching and selling out? What, if anything, separates the two? What are examples of code-switching?
11. What is the significance and importance of hair to Black women? Why do you think Black women take such pride in their hair?
12. Malaika and Nella have a very close friendship. How is the relationship between Nella and Malaika ultimately similar to the relationship of Kendra Rae and Diana?

13. Did the ending make you more optimistic or fearful? How could the Resistance stop OBGs? What could they have done differently to stop Hazel?

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Author Interview

Q. Many have said that "The Other Black Girl" is their favorite book of 2021. Did you know/feel like you were writing an instant classic during your writing process?

A. Not at all! I first started writing *The Other Black Girl* when I was still working in book publishing, and I really didn't have any expectations. I had no idea whether or not readers would connect with Nella's experience, or if they'd find publishing interesting enough of an industry to read about, or if the twist was too "out there"...I just knew I'd found a story that I genuinely enjoyed telling. So, it's really something to hear that.

Q. Many readers post the killing of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, last summer, expressed their want of reading more books by black women. What has it been like for you to hear readers from all backgrounds connect and appreciate your book?

A. It's been incredible, because that is so much of what *The Other Black Girl* is about: supporting Black voices in the publishing world. One of my favorite things about publishing this book has been saving screenshots of messages excited readers send me, and tweets that I'm tagged in.

But it does bum me out that it took a year like 2020 for readers to seek out more books by Black women (and Black people, period) because 2020 did not happen in a vacuum. There was injustice before it, and I'm sure there will be more in the future.

My hope, though—when I don't have my cynicism glasses on—is that momentum to read more books by Black women continues. My other hope is that the publishing world continues to see it, too—and that they don't just seek out more Black voices, but they also pay Black authors what they deserve to be paid.

Q. Your book highlights the pitfalls of tokenism and the "Crabs in a Barrel" mentality that often emerge because of lack of opportunities for people of marginalized backgrounds. Seeing that these themes are so delicate and hard to illuminate, as a black writer how did you go about authentically communicating these themes?

A. Generally, I think tokenism and the "crabs in a barrel" mentality both stem from the lack of diversity and representation in majority-white spaces like publishing. However, simply conveying Black people being pitted against one another wasn't enough for me. I felt it was also important to show the flip side: Black solidarity, which is what Nella initially assumes she will have with Hazel when she first starts working at Wagner.

Over the last seven years or so, I've thought a lot about the best way to spark change and upward mobility within the Black community. I really believe it depends on the situation and the person; there is no "right" way.

By including the perspective of each Black woman in this book, I hoped to show why both approaches are not only valid, but also dependent upon one another.

Each character has a different idea of how to be Black in a white space, and my hope is that this makes all of the characters—Nella and Kendra Rae, but Hazel and Diana, too—feel real, if not relatable. Maybe readers don't agree with how they handle certain things, but my hope is that readers will at least understand them.

Q. You also worked for a publishing house a few years back. If you don't mind us asking, how similar was your experience to Nella and also Hazel?

A. There is more of me in Nella than in Hazel, particularly Nella's complicated relationship with her Black identity.

I attended a mostly-white elementary school in Connecticut and my neighborhood was mostly white, so when I went on to attend middle school and high school, which were much more diverse, I experienced a bit of culture shock. I was sometimes made fun of for speaking "like a white girl".

Hazel came from a place of, "What would my own worst nightmare be?" And I came up with this idea of finally having a Black coworker, only to discover that she isn't the ally I presumed she would be. But I should also add that a lot of Hazel represents my insecurities. She is what I sometimes aspire to be: cool, confident, and plugged in to all the latest Black trends.

Q. Which character did you have more fun writing, Nella, or Hazel?

A. Writing Nella was easy in some ways, because the act itself was therapeutic...but sometimes too much so. For better or for worse, it made me examine my own tendency to overthink things. So, writing Hazel was much more fun. I'm definitely not calculating like she is, so I enjoyed getting to be chaotic and destructive through her.

Q. What's the weirdest/worst microaggression you have ever experienced?

A. My first name being misspelled, particularly in emails. It happened a lot when I was working in publishing, even though I would sign off with my name in every email. And it still happens now.

Q. This book has also been picked up as a Hulu adaptation. Congratulations! As a co-writer of the new adaption, what's your experience been like taking this novel and turning it into a screenplay?

A. It's been great! I didn't write this book in the hopes of it potentially being turned into a television show, so that was an amazing bonus. I'm learning so much, plus, I get to revisit this story, and the mechanics of the story, in an entirely new way.

Q. Finish the sentence: “Words are most powerful when _____”.

A. ...They're said in person.

Q. Overall, what do you hope writers get from this book?

A. I hope this book inspires readers to have lots of hard conversations, including ones about identity, race, and workplace culture.

I want employees who work in all kinds of industries to think more deeply about that diversity initiative that they've been asked to consider at work, and I want bosses to think more deeply about the struggles that their assistants—especially assistants of color—are experiencing.

But I also hope that this book will be a fun, entertaining, and informative read. This book shows unabashed conversations between Black people about all things Black culture; it shows Black women who are complicated and at times, downright messy.

Each has a different opinion on what it means to be successful. But there's a beauty in the fact that they are not a monolith, and my hope is that by giving each of them a place on the page, readers will walk away from this book with four additional examples of how nuanced we can be.

Which leads me to perhaps the thing I want the most, which is for Black readers to see themselves, or parts of themselves, in these pages.

Q. What's your best advice for getting over writer's block?

A. Switch it up. If you've been typing on your computer this whole time, try writing by hand instead, and vice-versa. It also helps when I take a break from trying to write and read something instead—a story, an essay, an article.

Q. What's the best book you have read so far this year?

A. So many! This year, I read and loved *The Ones Who Don't Say They Love You* by Maurice Carlos Ruffin, *The Black Kids* by Christina Hammonds Reed, and *Greenwich Park* by Katherine Faulkner.

Q. Do you plan on writing more books in the future?

A. Absolutely! Becoming a writer was my childhood dream, and now I get to do it as an adult. It doesn't get any better than that.

Retrieved from: <https://www.readmoreco.com/blogs/authors-interviews/q-a-with-zakiya-dalila-harris>

Other Links and Resources

Author Interviews – 'The Other Black Girl' In This New Thriller May Not Be Your Friend:
<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/29/1001313891/the-other-black-girl-in-this-new-thriller-may-not-be-your-friend>

Interview with Zakiya Dalila Harris:
<https://www.readingwomenpodcast.com/blog/interview-with-zakiya-dalila-harris>

UPlift Black Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion in Barrie:
<https://upliftblack.org/>

Making Change – a local, not-for-profit organization started by a group of passionate volunteers, led by a community of Black women:
<https://makingchangesc.com/>

Making Change – Learning Resources:
<https://makingchangesc.com/resources/>

#ITSTARTS With: A Conversation, a Movement, a Change!:
<https://www.simcoe.ca/dpt/ccs/lip/itstarts>

Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: