



Book Club Set

# The Vanishing Half

By Brit Bennett

## About the Author

Born and raised in Southern California, Brit Bennett earned her MFA in fiction at the University of Michigan. Her debut novel *The Mothers* was a New York Times bestseller, and her second novel *The Vanishing Half* was an instant #1 New York Times bestseller. Her essays have been featured in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, and *Jezebel*.

## About the Book

From The New York Times-Bestselling author of *The Mothers*, a stunning new novel about twin sisters, inseparable as children, who ultimately choose to live in two very different worlds, one black and one white.

The Vignes twin sisters will always be identical. But after growing up together in a small, southern black community and running away at age sixteen, it's not just the shape of their daily lives that is different as adults, it's everything: their families, their communities, their racial identities. Many years later, one sister lives with her black daughter in the same southern town she once tried to escape. The other secretly passes for white, and her white husband knows nothing of her past. But still, even separated by so many miles and just as many lies, the fates of the twins remain intertwined. What will happen to the next generation, when their own daughters' storylines intersect?

Weaving together multiple strands and generations of this family, from the Deep South of California, from the 1950s to the 1990s, Brit Bennett produces a story that is at once a riveting emotional family story and a brilliant exploration of the American history of passing. Looking well beyond issues of race, *The Vanishing Half* considers the lasting influence of the past as it shapes a person's decisions, desires, and expectations, and explores some of the multiple reasons and realms in which people sometimes feel pulled to live as something other than their origins.

As with her New York Times-bestselling debut *The Mothers*, Brit Bennett offers an engrossing page-turner about family and relationships that is immersive and provocative, compassionate and wise.

Retrieved from: <https://britbennett.com/the-vanishing-half>

## 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?

## Author Interview

**Q. Has it been surreal, too, to think about these parallel moments between the events in your novel and what's happening in the world right now?**

A. It's been eerie for me to see people describing the book as timely, because when I was writing it, I didn't think about it that way. Of course, these are conversations we've been having for decades, but I did not think that this would be the top thing that people would want to be talking about when the book came out. So it is surreal. The book opens in 1968 — that's a year that everybody wants to talk about right now.

**Q. What inspired you to set the book then? And more generally, what was the first seed of inspiration for the novel?**

A. I wanted to write a book about a town that exists in this weird liminal racial space between the worlds of black and white, in a time and a place in which binaries are very important. In the Jim Crow society, it's all about the binaries. So what does it mean to be outside of that binary? And then, what does it mean to leave that town? I was interested in the idea that this liminal third space was mobile, that it was something the characters carried with them even when they left the town and went off to other places.

**Q. I've heard you talk about how the town was based in part on stories your mom told you. When did she first mention a town like this, and what did you feel when she first mentioned it to you?**

A. We had a conversation on the phone around 2014. She mentioned offhandedly this place she remembered from her childhood. It struck me because I had always thought about colorism as interpersonal or systemic, but I never really thought of locating it within a specific town — that the view that light skin is preferable to dark skin could be instituted within a town, and that the town would be so invested in light skin that they would be striving toward genetically engineering their population to get lighter. There was something so strange and really striking about the implications of that. If that's the core value of your town, that's going to affect not only how you think about your body, and how you think about other people's bodies, but also who you marry and your kids. All of these really deeply intimate choices we all make in our lives will be governed by that core belief.

I was interested in this town as a mythological space. It's a place that has been filtered down to you from somebody else's memory.

**Q. When was the first time that you remember thinking about colorism and being aware of it?**

A. When I was a kid, I remember hearing people say things — like, dark-skinned women shouldn't wear red lipstick or you shouldn't wear bright colors if you're dark. I remember seeing the movie *Imitation of Life* when I was a child, which is about a white-

passing character. It's also a thing you just pick up on that nobody has to tell you. I was aware of the fact that when I was a child, the biggest black heartthrob was Halle Berry. I was aware of who is considered attractive, who is considered desirable, who's considered smart. But with this book, I was interested in the idea that colorism isn't something you observe, but is actually formalized and institutionalized in a place.

**Q. Focusing on a pair of twins is such an interesting way to explore that idea, too.**

A. Once I knew I wanted to write about this town, the twins were the next step. When I started thinking about who lived in the town, I realized, "Oh, I can have twin sisters who are living lives on opposite sides of the color line." Twins are so useful narratively. There's the mythological component — twins are important in a lot of different myths. They also allow us to explore questions of identity — how people turn out to be similar or different to each other. Once I started imagining that one of the twins would marry a dark-skinned man and have a dark child and return to the town, I wondered about the polar opposite of that experience. So I started thinking, okay, well, the other one passes for white, and she has a white child, and she's living somewhere else. That was a way to stretch those characters as far apart from each other as I could, and see how the story could exist in the tension between those two women being stretched to their edges.

**Q. And both of their lives are shaped by witnessing the same act of senseless violence when they were young. At what point in the writing process did that feel like necessary to you?**

A. I knew pretty early on that they would not have their father. The idea of them witnessing his murder was in fairly early drafts. I thought about these two little girls witnessing this thing that is both horrific and also unexplainable, so they'd have to exist in the illogic of this experience, have to spend their lives trying to make sense of something that doesn't make sense. In a way that traumatic moment is a second birth for them, setting them on their different paths, because of how differently they each react to this experience.

**Q. When I was reading the sections about Stella living as a white woman, I was reminded a little bit of your Jezebel essay, because she basically becomes a good white person, and those are the sorts of white people she's surrounded by. I was curious to hear about how you thought about the kind of white person she would become.**

A. It's something I thought about a lot, because I kept thinking "what type of guy is she gonna marry?" In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the white-passing character marries this guy who's a huge bigot, and it increases the tension in the story because you're thinking, *oh my God, what's going to happen when he finds out?* That was one thing I thought about — maybe she joins this deeply loud and proud racist white family, and she has to ingratiate herself that way? But what ultimately felt more interesting was for her to join this moderate, well-mannered, polite white family, because she has to learn how to

perform whiteness in this way she has never experienced as a black person. She has to learn how to be white in a way that is acceptable within this suburban, upper-class community, and that's different than these men she saw murder her father. That's different than what she had experienced as a black woman growing up in the Jim Crow South. I found that that was a lot more complex, that she's constantly having to teach herself how to perform whiteness when the scripts for whiteness are being changed around her all the time. And she's always kind of doing it wrong.

Even beyond that, I didn't want current white readers to be able to separate themselves from these characters. Sometimes that's what you risk when you have white characters who are very obviously, cartoonishly bigoted. Nobody thinks of themselves as a bigot, so people see that and they're just like, well, that's not me. These characters are pleasant. They would never burn a cross on somebody's lawn. They have values that are much more similar to most contemporary white American readers. That's what's useful about the good white people community Stella joins. It doesn't allow the reader to look away.

**Q. Were those the sort of white people you grew up around?**

A. Yeah, that was my experience. I grew up in Northern San Diego. I had white friends growing up, I had white teachers who mentored me. We had lots of white neighbors who were very kind to us. And I think about how unusual that is in the history of my family. I remember having white friends come over when my grandpa would be over, and he would just be amused. That was funny to him, because my grandpa lived in Watts, and that was certainly not his experience when he was a kid. Learning how to experience race and these intimacies in a way that is murkier, that's something that's true of me, not only because of where I grew up, but when I grew up. My parents didn't grow up with white friends. As adults, as co-workers and colleagues, they gained white friends. So I learned race differently than they did, and differently than my grandparents did.

**Q. You'd have a much easier time learning to be white than Stella does.**

A. I think so. I have a fluency with white culture because I've had to have that fluency, but also because I've grown up alongside it and seen it displayed as the predominant culture. For Stella, it's not like she grew up watching TV. They didn't have access to this white world — they're really sealed away from it. So she has to learn on the fly, how to speak differently, and how to express the right opinions. And it's not only that she's become white, but that she's entered this upper-class world. She hasn't learned racial fluency in a way that she needs to succeed in this kind of world, so she has to constantly learn these new scripts, at a time in which they are being challenged and rewritten right around her. She's passing during the civil rights and post civil-rights movement, at a time in which integration is increasing. So her performance of whiteness is always wrong, it's always one step behind.



**Q. It's interesting to think about performing race at this moment when racial tensions in the country are so high, when so much of the conversation right now revolves around the Black Lives Matter movement.**

A. The idea of performing race raises really interesting questions: what does it mean to live in a country that is built on racial hierarchies if the categories are permeable? If we can't even know the categories — which we can't. We don't know people's gender, or their race, we just make these assumptions. And then we have all of these social and political and economic implications that come from these assumptions we're making. Sometimes when you say race or gender is a social construct, people think what you're saying is those things are not real. It's not the same as saying that race is not real, that's just saying that the way we think about race is not natural or inherent or inevitable. These are ideas that are constructed by us, over time that we've agreed upon, that we have reinforced, that we have propagated. There's nothing inevitable about these categories.

What becomes really interesting about passing is that, on the one hand you have this character who is exposing the flimsiness of racial categories — because if you can perform whiteness then what does it mean to be white? If you can move between these categories because you decide that you will, what does it mean that we have systems that are built on reinforcing those categories? And so the passing character is really transgressive and maybe even kind of liberatory. But on the other hand, these characters who pass usually end up reinforcing the hierarchies that they are potentially destabilizing. When Stella becomes a white woman, she's not attacking white supremacy. She actually ends up embodying white supremacy in order to maintain her role as a white woman. The tension within passing stories is between this idea of destabilizing race and then reaffirming race at the same time.

**Q. I've read you talk in other interviews about how you didn't want to write a story where the passing character would be punished or judged for her choice. But at the same time, reading the novel, Stella seems so unhappy. And as a reader, it's clear she has made a choice that's left her empty in some sort of fundamental way.**

A. I think that's true. When I was a kid, and I watched *Imitation of Life*, I found that movie so baffling. Why would somebody do this? Why would you just decide that you want to be white? It was difficult for me to imagine, which I think is probably a credit to how I grew up and the love I was taught for myself and my culture. I had a hard time wrapping my mind around that movie, which is a very moralizing story. At the end, this character is punished — her mother dies, and she feels so guilty she disowned her mother and she's shamed for transgressing between these categories.

I didn't want to do that — I just don't think that makes interesting fiction. But at the same time I did want to think about what Stella is losing by passing. We can imagine what she's gaining — she's getting money, status, access, safety, all these things she didn't have before that she wanted. But the idea of what she's losing was the most interesting.

Losing her family, her connection to her sister, her connection to her home. She's got this hollow center, because this whole section of her life she can't talk about with anybody. She can't tell her daughter, her husband, who she loves; she can't be wholly herself because she's constantly worried about being caught.

**Q. In addition to the protests around the country, this week has also been a dramatic one in the books world, with the strike, and the #PublishingPaidMe hashtag blowing up on Twitter. Although those conversations have also been going on for years, there seems to be heightened focus on the racial inequities within the publishing industry right now. In light of that, I'm curious about what your path to publication was like.**

A. My road to publication was a lot smoother than a lot of writers' were, particularly a lot of black writers. I wrote the Jezebel essay as I was finishing up at my MFA, and that essay led me to my agent. I was working on *The Mothers* at the time, and we were able to sell that book as I was leaving my MFA in the spring. We had interest from a bunch of different editors, and we received a preempt before we went to auction. I've been really fortunate. I'm an outlier, compared to what I saw on Twitter.

But I hope it's a moment of reckoning for the book world. I'm hoping that this is not just this capitalism moment of, "Oh, we see people are interested in black stories, let's push those." We've seen this influx of anti-racist reading lists. And even for myself, my novel is not *How to Be An Antiracist*, it's not *White Fragility*. It's not something I wrote to teach people anything. But even considering that, I know there's been a rush of support for this book because of the conversations that are happening right now about how it's important to read black people and to read about black people. And I think that's good. But I also think you should read fiction by black people because these books are good, and not because those books will teach you how to be a better person. I always cringe a little bit at that kind of discourse: that reading a book by black person is like eating your broccoli. Two of our greatest living American writers right now are Colson Whitehead and Jesmyn Ward. How do you not read those people if you're reading contemporary American fiction?

**Q. Lauren Michele Jackson wrote a great essay on Vulture about this recently, about the inherent problem with anti-racist reading lists.**

A. The idea of reading *Beloved* as some how-to guide just kills my spirit, you know? Yes, there are things I learned while reading *Beloved*, yes that's part of the experience, but it's a book that's a marvel of language. It's the images, it's the rhythm of the sentences, in addition to the ideas. That's a thing that I find troubling — that you can or should reduce fiction by black authors into ideas. That these books are content you can extract something from, and that is their value, versus the idea that you read these books because they are beautiful.

Retrieved from: <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/brit-bennett-the-vanishing-half-interview.html>

## Other Links and Resources

Author Interview – Brit Bennett Set Her Novel 50 Years Ago — She Didn't Expect It To Be 'Timely':

<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 – Brit Bennett, author of THE MOTHERS and THE VANISHING HALF | Books Connect Us podcast:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5g8CBuh1yY>

## 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: