



Book Club Set

When No One is Watching

By Alyssa Cole

About the Author



Alyssa Cole is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* Bestselling author of romance, thrillers, and graphic novels. Her Civil War-set espionage romance *An Extraordinary Union* was the American Library Association's RUSA Best Romance for 2018; her contemporary rom-com *A Princess in Theory* was one of the *New York Times*' 100 Notable Books of 2018; and her debut thriller *When No One Is Watching* was the winner of the 2021 Edgar Award for Best Paperback Original. Her books have received critical acclaim from the *Washington Post*, *Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, *BuzzFeed*, *Book Riot*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and various other outlets. When she's not working, she can usually be found watching anime or wrangling her pets.

Retrieved from: <https://alyssacole.com/>

About the Book



Rear Window meets Get Out in this gripping thriller from a critically acclaimed and New York Times Notable author, in which the gentrification of a Brooklyn neighborhood takes on a sinister new meaning...

Sydney Green is Brooklyn born and raised, but her beloved neighborhood seems to change every time she blinks. Condos are sprouting like weeds, FOR SALE signs are popping up overnight, and the neighbors she's known all her life are disappearing. To hold onto her community's past and present, Sydney channels her frustration into a walking tour and finds an unlikely and unwanted assistant in one of the new arrivals to the block—her neighbor Theo.

But Sydney and Theo's deep dive into history quickly becomes a dizzying descent into paranoia and fear. Their neighbors may not have moved to the suburbs after all, and the push to revitalize the community may be more deadly than advertised.

When does coincidence become a conspiracy? Where do people go when gentrification pushes them out? Can Sydney and Theo trust each other—or themselves—long enough to find out before they too disappear?

Featured in Parade, Essence, Bustle, Popsugar, Elle, Shondaland, Marie Claire, BuzzFeed, Entertainment Weekly, Good Housekeeping, Brit + Co, Real Simple, Lit Hub, Crime Reads, Blavity, Ms. Magazine, Hello Giggles, The New York Times, Town & Country, Newsweek, New York Post, Refinery29, Woman's World, Washington Post, the Skimm, Book Riot, Bookish, Huffington Post, and more!

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Discussion Questions



1. Discuss the mystery aspect of the plotline. How effective is the author's use of plot twists and red herrings? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened, or did the author keep you guessing until the end of the story?
2. Did you find that the novel held your interest throughout the story, or were there times when it failed to totally engross members of the group?
3. What is the most important part of a mystery or thriller to you, is it characterization, action, dialogue, or setting? How does this book rate in each of these areas?
4. Did you find the author equally invested in both character and plot? Or did the author put more effort into developing the story than in creating compelling and believable characters? Were the motivations of the characters believable, or did their actions feel like a means to further the plot?
5. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Do you want to read more work by this author?

Retrieved from:

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/when-no-discussion-guide-is-available-mystery-thriller>

Author Interview



What inspired *When No One Is Watching*?

When No One Is Watching is inspired by the real-life gentrification I witnessed over a lifetime in NYC and New Jersey, and also by the extensive historical research I've done over the last decade — first for personal reasons and then for my historical romances, which are set in eras ranging from the Battle of Brooklyn to the Freedom Rides. As I researched, it became apparent to me that if the arc of the moral universe does bend toward justice, that isn't its natural inclination. It's only from the hard work of people fighting against the forces of greed and white supremacy that was laid into the foundation of America. This book is an exploration of how maddening it can be to discover injustice and feel that no one will believe you — or if they *do* believe you, they won't care, which is the reality of Black people and most marginalized groups in America.

Have you seen your own neighborhood change?

I'm not from Brooklyn but was born in the Bronx, grew up across the river in Jersey, and then moved to Brooklyn after college and spent much of my adult life there. I've lived in multiple neighborhoods in Brooklyn — on the edges of those already gentrified and in the middle of those just beginning to feel the shift, and I've also seen the shift in the neighborhood where I grew up. Like in the book, I've seen changes like condos going up, new stores and restaurants, and shifts in the demographics in the neighborhood. Of course no one expects a neighborhood or place to stay the same, but with these changes comes a cost — for example, people who bought a home and thought they'd achieved the American dream suddenly having their property taxes jacked up.

How did the experience of writing a thriller differ from writing a romance?

Hm, well, my romances often have a bit of darkness about them (the "meet-cute" in at least two of my books — *Be Not Afraid*, a Revolutionary War romance novella, and *Radio Silence*, a speculative fiction romance — have taken place over a dead body), but I got to delve a little deeper into it in a thriller. And all of my romances have a bit of mystery to them, but something I've been thinking about a lot is that all romance writers are mystery writers. This is why it's hard to get anything by Romancelandia on social media. People outside of romance believe that our main genre rule — the "happily ever after" ending — is some kind of cliché that makes the books easier to write, and that couldn't be further from the truth!

At the outset of every romance, the reader knows the characters will get together at the end of the book, *and yet* you as the author have to truly make them (a) invested in this couple getting together and (b) completely convinced that it might not work out, while also balancing all of the emotions that come with the various kinds of relationships. Romance writers know how to lay down clues and surprise you with twists and highs and lows like nobody's business. So the main difference was, at various beats, choosing to bring anxiety and fear to the forefront instead of the good-romance-novel-tingles and romantic tension.

***When No One Is Watching* touches on issues that are at the forefront of current conversations around race and oppression in the US, especially against Black communities — themes like gentrification, whitewashing, capitalism. (I've seen the book described as "Rear Window meets Get Out.") Can you talk a bit about exploring these themes in your writing, especially in a genre that has been so white for so long?**

Well, these are themes I've explored for most of my writing career, and in a way this book is a way of processing how, through writing romance and now thrillers, I was exposed to how deeply ingrained white supremacy is in the American imagination as well as in its institutions. There are people who find the idea of Black people in love unbelievable, of Black people solving crime unbelievable, who seem to think people

from marginalized groups are nonplayer characters who just wait around for something to happen to them. And the themes explored in this book are simply reality — seeing the protests and uprisings across the country lately for issues that are raised in this book has been very surreal but not surprising. There's a line in the book where Sydney says "nothing stays buried in this city," and that's true of America, too. You can't pave over injustice and pretend everything is fine.

In many ways, it does seem like the protests since George Floyd's death have spurred a wave of cultural shifts and public reckonings — some more substantial than others. What has it been like, especially as a Black writer, to see this really sudden moment of acknowledgment, after, as you mention, a long history of America either not believing or not caring about Black Americans' experiences of racism?

It's disorienting for sure, and a bit overwhelming — the idea that there was, like, a death and trauma tipping point to make people realize you exist. While it's heartening to see that people are becoming aware of your surroundings it's kind of like...someone stepping on your foot during an interminable subway commute and not noticing as you shout and try to pull your foot away; then, when the pain has almost become unbearable, they look down and realize you're in agony, and everyone around you suddenly notices, too. Even if everyone starts helping at that moment, your ears are still ringing from your ignored screams.

Are you hopeful about the future of the publishing industry?

I'm hopeful that things will get better because Black writers have been out here writing amazing books, and more readers are going to realize that as they read through books they've purchased to show support. And hopefully people in publishing will reconsider things that were just considered common knowledge — like who reads books by Black authors, what the comps for these books are, and what the sales potential for these

books are. Acquisitions are great, but editors actually aren't the final word and all levels of publishing need to reassess.

Any new projects you can talk about?

Yes! My next release after *When No One Is Watching* is *How to Catch a Queen*, the first in the *Runaway Royals* series. Like my *Reluctant Royals* series, it's a fairy tale with a modern twist — this one is inspired by Bluebeard, without all the murder. It's an arranged marriage story with a woman who's determined to be a queen (and to change the world for the better), marrying a king who is trapped in the figurative tower of his kingdom's isolationist policies. Kind of a second-chance romance for an already married couple who don't really know one another, plus an exploration of the idea of good governance and knowing what you deserve in relationships both personal and political.

What are some of your favorite thrillers?

Oooh, well, I grew up reading Mary Higgins Clark and Walter Mosley, but some of my recent faves have been Rachel Howzell Hall's *Detective Elouise Norton* series (the first book is *Land of Shadows*), Victoria Helen Stone's *Jane Doe*, and Nalini Singh's *A Madness of Sunshine*. I also just got S.A. Cosby's *Blacktop Wasteland*, which just came out, and I can't wait to dive in.

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<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ariannarebolini/alyssa-cole-interview-when-no-one-is-watching>

Other Links and Resources

- Alyssa Cold media: <https://alyssacole.com/media/>
- Other Books by the author:
 - <https://alyssacole.com/mystery-thriller/>
 - <https://alyssacole.com/romance/>

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: