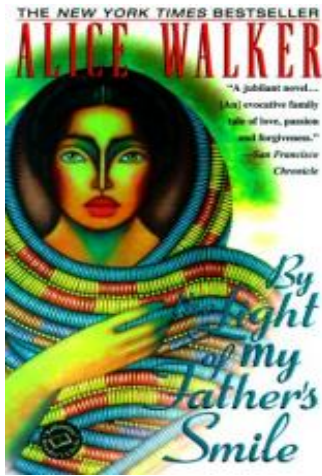


## By the Light of My Father's Smile

by Alice Walker



### About the Book

**By the Light of My Father's Smile** is Alice Walker's first novel in six years--a stunning, original, and important book by "one of the best American writers of today" (*The Washington Post*).

A family from the United States goes to the remote Sierras in Mexico--the writer-to-be, Susannah; her sister, Magdalena; her father and mother. And there, amid an endangered band of mixed-race Blacks and Indians called the Mundo, they begin an encounter that will change them more than they could ever dream. Moving back and forth in time, and among unforgettable characters and their stories, Walker crosses conventional borders of all kinds as she explores in this magical novel the ways in which a woman's denied sexuality leads to the loss of the much prized and necessary original self; and how she regains that self, even as her family's past of lies and love is transformed.

**By the Light of My Father's Smile** presents, as Alice Walker puts it, "a celebration of sexuality, its absolute usefulness in the accessing of one's mature spirituality, and the father's role in assuring joy or sorrow in this arena for his female children." It explores the richness and coherence of alternative culture, experience of sexuality as a celebration of life, of trust in Nature and the Spirit, even as it affirms the belief, as Walker says, "that it is the triumphant heart, not the conquered heart, that forgives. And that love is both timeless and beyond time."

### Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Alice Walker chose to write this novel in the voices of several different narrators? Which character's story do you think is the center of the novel? Do you think the use of different voices interrupts the story or enriches it? Does the author succeed in making each voice distinctive? Give examples.

2. The novel underscores the potency of lies and hypocrisy. The web of deceit practiced by the Robinsons, the African American anthropologist couple posing as missionaries and who are unable to find funding for their study of the Mundo

tribe, is particularly telling on this point. How does the irony of their masquerade as "puritanical Christians" play into the tragedy at the novel's center?

3. Alice Walker says the book "examines the way imposed religion almost always acts to inhibit and harden the hearts of those who would instinctively love." Is she referring to the rigid dogma of institutional religion and its condemnation of the pursuit of sensual pleasure? If so, what instances in this novel are used to explore this theme?

4. One recurring theme in the novel is the corruption of indigenous spiritual beliefs by Western civilization. How does Walker's handling of this idea affect the novel's storytelling?

5. The psychological approaches employed by both daughters to master the emotional trauma of Magdalena's beating illuminates the differences in their personalities. Why would Magdalena choose emotional repression and excesses of eating and drinking as her route to emotional comfort, instead of pursuing the more sexually experimental path of her sister, Susannah? Compare and contrast the two situations.

6. How responsible is Mr. Robinson for the life choices of his daughter? At what point does a child or adult become accountable for choices made in life despite parental miscues and the tragedies of the past? In what ways are these questions central to the novel?

7. Recalling the sexual conduct of the Robinsons and their daughters, can you conclude that sex possesses spiritual and redemptive qualities? Can it be used to heal emotional wounds and to enhance one's personal growth?

8. Some critics have interpreted Walker's statement of "celebrating one's sexuality" as one of this novel's key themes and an embrace of lesbianism and repudiation of traditional heterosexuality and patriarchal influences. Do you agree or disagree with this contention? If so, does Walker make an effective case to support this view?

9. How is the depiction of the Mundo tribe, with their celebration of sexuality, nature, and community, an essential element in highlighting the hypocrisy of the Robinsons and all they represent? How does this presentation of the tribe cause a conflict of faith and conscience for Mr. Robinson and his wife?

10. The theme of the abusive father, the healing, loving sexual relationship with another woman, and the quest of two sisters for emotional and spiritual liberation from the patriarchal oppression of a dominant male appears also in Walker's award-winning novel, **The Color Purple**. If you have read **The Color Purple**, explain how the plight of Celie and Nettie in this earlier novel is similar yet different from the dilemma of Magdalena and Susannah.

11. In **The Color Purple**, the theme of reclaiming one's sexual freedom as a major step in achieving sexual power, emotional wholeness, and spiritual autonomy plays a critical part in the story. How do these same issues emerge in this later work? And what is their significance?

12. Why might some readers not be totally sensitive to Magdalena's self abuse and ultimate suicide by gluttony in the wake of the harsh childhood treatment by her father? Why might we be tempted to say, "Get off it and get on with your life"? And might not this attitude reflect our fear of examining the places we have been hurt and our lack of compassion for our own suffering?

**13.** Explain the importance of the following words of Manuelito, the Mundo tribesman: "It is understood that spirituality resides in the groin, in the sexual organs. Not in the mind, and not in the heart." In what ways does this statement reveal one of the major themes of the novel? And how comfortable are we when we discover that another culture's take on Existence or Meaning is entirely different than our own?

**14.** Susannah's marriage with Petros the Greek and her affair with Pauline serve as mirror images of the heroine's approach to finding spiritual and emotional growth and sexual satisfaction. How does the author set up the parallel of the two unions as portraits of Susannah's struggle for completion? Does her approach succeed?

**15.** Like the deeply wounded father, Mister, in **The Color Purple**, who becomes transformed and healed through the love of a child, Mr. Robinson, as an angel in the afterlife, becomes an agent for change and healing in this novel. Why is his intervention so crucial to Susannah's healing?

**16.** Some reviewers found that the author's use of spiritual realism draws attention away from the events and distances readers from the characters. Do you share their view? Why or why not?

**17.** Walker's novels often explore the usefulness of suffering. What is she saying with the statement: "Why is it that we can love so much that which only makes us cry?" How does this view apply to the Robinson daughters?

**18.** What is the irony of Manuelito, Magdalena's childhood lover, serving as Mr. Robinson's spirit guide? How does Manuelito's indigenous wisdom serve to temper the father's conservative "civilized" beliefs?

**19.** The pleasure in reading Walker's complex novels can be found in experiencing secondary characters such as the cigarette-smoking dwarf, Irene. What is the importance of Irene and her relationship with Susannah?

**20.** At the core of the novel is the pressing question of the treatment of daughters by fathers. What fuels the fears of fathers that their teenage daughters might develop their sexuality? Compare and contrast that treatment by fathers and its affect on young girls in later life with the treatment of boys and their emergence into manhood.

**21.** The repeating of the Mundo initiation song occurs often in the novel. Why is it important that Mr. Robinson learn and practice this song after he is dead? What do you think is the meaning of the verse:

*Anyone can see that the sky is naked  
and if the sky is naked  
the earth must be  
naked too.*

## Author Bio

Alice Walker, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, is a canonical figure in American letters. She is the author of **THE COLOR PURPLE**, **THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR**, **HORSES MAKE A LANDSCAPE LOOK MORE BEAUTIFUL**, **THE WAY FORWARD IS WITH A BROKEN HEART**, **NOW IS THE TIME TO OPEN YOUR HEART**, and many other works of fiction, poetry and nonfiction. Her writings have been translated into more than two

dozen languages, and more than 15 million copies of her books have been sold worldwide.

## Critical Praise

"Alice Walker is a lavishly gifted writer."

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