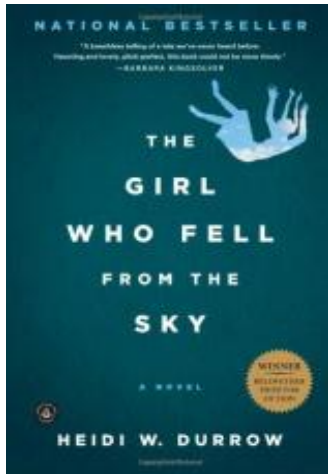


The Girl Who Fell From the Sky

by Heidi W. Durrow



About the Book

Rachel, the daughter of a Danish mother and a black G.I., is the sole survivor of a tragic family incident. With her strict African American grandmother as her new guardian, Rachel moves to a mostly black community, where her light brown skin, blue eyes, and beauty bring a constant stream of mixed attention her way. As she attempts to come to terms with an unfathomable past, she confronts her own identity as a biracial young woman in a world that wants to see her as either black or white.

Discussion Guide

- 1. The Girl Who Fell from the Sky** is set in the 1980s. How does its chronological setting affect its plot and themes? Do you think the novel's events might play out any differently if it were set in contemporary times?
- Rachel's grandma notes proudly that she was the first African American woman to buy a house in her Portland, Oregon, neighborhood. Does the geographic setting reflect the novel's themes in any way? How might the story or Grandma's character or Rachel's coming-of-age be different had the story been set in the Deep South?
- The image of Rachel's family falling from the sky is horrific, especially when it's described from Jamie's point of view. How does the reader come to understand what happened in that scene? How did you feel on making that discovery?
- Why does Jamie decide to change his name to Brick? What is the significance in his renaming himself? Does he get what he claims he wanted, "a new history to his name" (page 42)?
- When does Rachel first become aware of her racial difference? What does it mean for her identity when she starts to see herself as the "new girl" (page 10)? How does her understanding of her identity continue to evolve during the

novel?

6. The word nigger is used many times in the novel. What kind of personal reaction did you have to reading this word repeatedly? Do you think the author uses the word effectively in this context? What does Nella's observation that "if she is just a word then she doesn't have me" (page 243) mean?

7. Issues of sex, violence, and romantic love are wrapped up with each other throughout the novel. In what ways do ideas about sex and love become twisted? Does the book depict any positive romantic and/or sexual relationships?

8. What is Brick's motivation for following Rachel? Does knowing the story that he learns from Rachel's father help you understand Nella's motivations more fully?

9. What insights into Nella's character and motivations do you gain from reading her journal entries? What do you think of Laronne's belief that Nella "was journeying to where her love was enough, and it could fill the sky" (page 156)?

10. At the end of the novel, Rachel reflects, "In his eyes, I'm not the new girl. I'm not the color of my skin. I'm a story. One with a past and a future unwritten" (page 264). How does learning, and telling, stories relate to Rachel's changing sense of herself and her family?

11. Imagery of flying and falling runs throughout the novel. Are these two concepts always opposites? At the end, is Rachel more inspired to fall or to fly?

Author Bio

Heidi W. Durrow has won the Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition and the Chapter One Fiction Contest. She has received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the American Scandinavian Foundation, and the Lois Roth Endowment and a Fellowship for Emerging Writers from the Jerome Foundation. Her writing has been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, the *Literary Review*, and others.

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