ReadingGroupGuides
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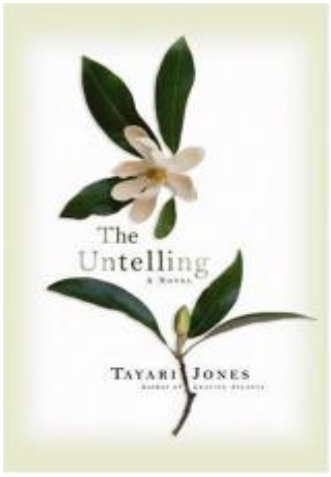
The Untelling

by Tayari Jones



About the Book

Her debut novel, Leaving Atlanta, was declared "mesmerizing" (*Marie Claire*) and selected as one of the best books of the year by the *Washington Post*. She was praised as a "powerful storyteller" (*Publishers Weekly*) for her "eloquent voice" (*People*). Now, in her latest novel, Tayari Jones paints a vivid, unforgettable portrait of a woman seeking to overcome the trauma of her past.

When Aria Jackson was nine, a car accident killed her father and baby sister, forever destroying her family's secure middle-class life. The tragedy left her elegant mother, her rebellious sister, and Aria herself wounded by grief, rage, and guilt. Caught between her mother's bitter dissatisfaction and her sister's efforts to distance herself from the family altogether, Aria grew up alone, despite sharing a crowded home with her mother and sister.

At age twenty-five, Aria has created a meaningful life for herself, living in a not-quite gentrified inner-city neighborhood, teaching literacy to teenaged girls. For the first time in her life, she has both a best girlfriend in whom she can confide and a boyfriend who offers her love and respect.

When Aria discovers she may be pregnant, she is seduced by the promise of family, the lure of a normal life, and the dream of a fresh start. Then everything changes in ways she never anticipated. As she mediates between her past and her altered reality, she unearths secrets about family and friends and searches for the courage to divulge one heartbreaking revelation about herself.

Poignant, evocative, and luminously insightful, **The Untelling** speaks of the truths we hide even from ourselves, the circumstances that can either undermine or restore us, and the transformative power of examining all that we keep untold.

Discussion Guide

1. At the heart of **The Untelling** is the question of how to deal with the past. Aria tries to choose between her mother's approach that a traumatic even can never be overcome and her sister's idea that a person has to put the past behind her. In this novel, which way of dealing with the past is more effective?

2. For much of the novel, Aria is afraid to tell Dwayne her terrible secret. How do you think he would have reacted if she had told him the truth, right up front?

3. Aria and Rochelle live in a neighborhood that is in the middle of urban-renewal. Are there such neighborhoods in your community? What are the pros and cons of such projects?

4. Aria and her sisters were all given unusual names by their parents. Keisha, the young mother, has her own ideas about the best way to name a child. What are your thoughts about this subject?

5. Keisha becomes very angry when she thinks that Lawrence may want to adopt her baby. Who do you think would be the better parent?

6. Whenever Aria's mother becomes angry with her, she says, "This is not what Dr. King died for." What is the role of history in this novel? What historical event "haunts" your own life?

7. At the end of the story, Aria's mother confesses her own terrible secret. Does this make you feel more sympathetic to her? Does it justify her behavior toward her daughters?

8. Infertility is a subject that is talked about "behind closed doors". Why do you think there is such a cultural stigma on the subject? Why do you think there has been so little discussion on this issue, especially in the ways that it affects African-American women?

9. The novel's ending is sort of open-ended. What do you think will become of Aria in terms of her relationship with her family? Dwayne? Keisha?

10. How do you interpret the title of the novel?

Author Bio

Tayari Jones is the author of five novels, most recently KIN and AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE, which was an Oprah?s Book Club selection and also appeared on Barack Obama?s summer reading list and his year-end roundup. It won the Women?s Prize for Fiction, the Aspen Words Literary Prize, and an NAACP Image Award, and has been published in two dozen countries. Jones is the C.H. Candler Professor of English and Creative Writing at Emory University and lives in Atlanta.

Critical Praise

"Tayari Jones is one of the finest writers of her generation."

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