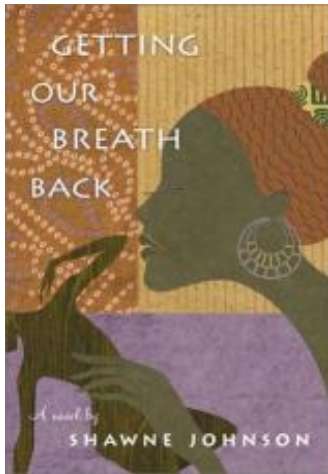


Getting our Breath Back

by Shawne Johnson



About the Book

Getting Our Breath Back is a stunning, multi-layered story that follows the loves of three women as they move from the chaos of the sixties to the disillusionment of the seventies.

Violet, Lilly, and Rose are three sisters who are trying to find their place in a changing world. Violet, the eldest, grows up believing in the myth of the Southern belle-only to discover that good manners and genteel charm aren't going to make her marriage any easier. Lilly, an ex-Black Panther and writer caught up in the stormy aftermath of the sixties, shuts out this new world of confusion with heroin. Rose, the youngest, is a sculptor who has shaped herself in the image of an independent black woman. But she carries a secret heartache that resonates in the life of her daughter, Imani, who is searching for the father she has never known.

Careening through the chaos and optimism of the sixties through the disappointments of the seventies, **Getting Our Breath Back** is an earthy and atmospheric story of emotional turmoil and self-reinvention.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways do Violet, Lilly, and Rose come to terms with their identities? How does each sister deal with her specific issues? How do they deal with each other's issues?
2. Discuss the relationship between the sisters and with their mother. Does their mother play an integral part in their lives?
3. At one point Mama threatens to kill Lilly if she doesn't get off heroin and, for a time, Lilly stays clean. Why does Mama's threat ultimately fail? What, if anything, do you think Mama may have done differently to save Lilly?

4. "Daddy died and anything resembling male strength was forever gone from the house and Rose holding on to Mama and Lilly and Violet's hands and all of them falling into each other the same way Daddy falling into the grave." How do you think Rose, Lilly, and Violet would be different if their father had not passed away at such an early stage in their lives? Do you think that the girls need strong male role models like they need strong female role models?

5. Lilly was her Daddy's "favorite girl? Most of the pictures of Daddy ended up in her room, hanging from her walls, stuck under the corners and edges of mirrors, and everywhere she looked, Daddy staring back at her and it still wasn't enough, the pictures just hinting at the person that Daddy was and leaving her always wanting his hands on her hair and his lips on her forehead and his breath, smelling like cigarettes and rum, against any part of her face." Do you think Ben Carter was a replacement for her father? Were drugs an excuse for her to not cope with the death of her father? Was there any meaning to her jumbled thoughts or did she just ramble?

6. Violet feels that her marriage can survive if she maintains her illusion of physical perfection. What is flawed about her attempts to save her family? What finally makes her move back to Mama's?

7. According to Taji's descriptions of the Black Panther movement, what was the group's view on women? In what ways did being involved with the Black Panthers effect Lilly's life?

8. Taji was immediately taken with Imani when they first met and Imani was just as taken with him. What made her feel so at ease with him?

9. In many ways, Imani searches for a father in the men that Rose brings home. How are Rose's relationships damaging to Imani? How do these possible fathers compare to Charles, Imani's real father?

10. Why does Rose keep her past a secret from Taji? Why, when Rose's past comes to light, is Taji so angry with her? What has she hidden and why?

11. What do you think Imani will be like as a woman?

12. When Imani finds Lilly working on her "mural," Lilly tells her all about a dream that she has had. What do you think Lilly's dream means?

13. Violet is described as a child with a violent temper. Are there traces of the child that Violet was in the woman she has become? What has happened to change her?

14. Why does Rose feel more connected to women than men? How does this effect her sculpture? What else effects her sculpture?

15. As the only child with a voice in this narrative, what is Imani's significance? How does Imani see each of her aunts in comparisons to how she sees her mother?

16. Do you think Lilly was at peace when she died? Was dying the only way she thought she could achieve peace? How does Lilly's death change her family?

17. Do you think Rose should have told Imani that her father was white? What do you think Imani would say to her father?

18. What does the title of the book mean? How is each of these women getting her breath back?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"Shawne Johnson tells this tale in an entirely original voice; her style seeming to pay homage to the era that serves as its backdrop, with phrasing that captures the rhythm of the Black Panther rhetoric?Totally fresh, intimate, and familiar with everyday details? **Getting Our Breath Back** is an unhurried song, purposefully reiterative, with triumphs, heartaches, awakenings, and acts of love."

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