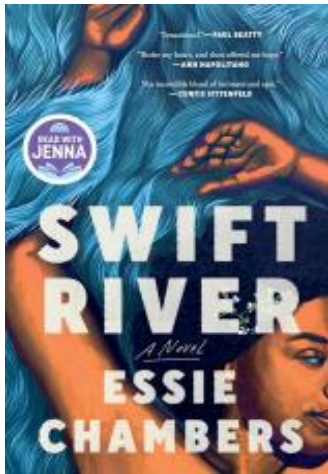


Swift River

by Essie Chambers



About the Book

?The book we all need to revive our souls? (Nicole Dennis-Benn): A sweeping family saga about the complicated bond between mothers and daughters, the disappearance of a father, and the long-hidden history of a declining New England mill town.

It's the summer of 1987 in Swift River, and Diamond Newberry is learning how to drive. Ever since her Pop disappeared seven years ago, she and her mother hitchhike everywhere they go. But that's not the only reason Diamond stands out: she's teased relentlessly about her weight, and since Pop has been gone, she's the only Black person in all of Swift River. This summer, Ma is determined to declare Pop legally dead so that they can collect his life insurance money, get their house back from the bank, and finally move on.

But when Diamond receives a letter from a relative she's never met, key elements of Pop's life are uncovered. She is introduced to two generations of African American Newberry women, whose lives span the 20th century and reveal a much larger picture of prejudice and abandonment, of love and devotion. As pieces of their shared past become clearer, Diamond gains a sense of her place in the world and in her family. But how will what she's learned of the past change her future?

A story of first friendships, family secrets and finding the courage to let go, *SWIFT RIVER* is a sensational debut about how history shapes us and heralds the arrival of a major new literary talent.

Discussion Guide

1. Before reading *SWIFT RIVER*, what, if anything, did you know about sundown towns? Did you learn anything about them that surprised you?

2. Did reading *SWIFT RIVER* make you think differently about your own hometown, and whether there are elements of your own town's history that have been largely omitted from the historical record? Are there narratives about your hometown that you might view differently now? If you wanted to learn more about the history of your hometown --- both the history that's been written about and the history that's been left off the record --- where would you start?
3. What do you think happened to Diamond's father?
4. So many of the characters in *SWIFT RIVER*, from Diamond to Ma to Shelley to Pop to Clara, have different modes of survival, different ways of getting through hard times. Discuss the different ways these characters deal with difficulty. Did you relate to some of these strategies or coping mechanisms more than others?
5. As the only Black person in all of Swift River, Diamond is something of an outsider. Discuss ways in which her "otherness" sometimes renders her hyper-visible and other times renders her largely invisible.
6. How important is your family or community history to you and your understanding of yourself and your place in the world? Have you ever learned something about your family or ancestors that sifted your understanding of who you are and where you come from?
7. Of the three main voices in *SWIFT RIVER* --- Diamond's, Lena's and Clara's --- whose did you connect with the most? What, if anything, did you relate to about each woman?
8. Lena sends Diamond Clara's letters to Sweetie, but she doesn't have Sweetie's responses to Clara. Did you imagine any of Sweetie's responses? Did you feel like you got a good sense of her through Clara's letters to her?
9. What did having the three voices of Diamond, Lena and Clara add to your understanding of this family and the history of Swift River? Other than the fact that these three women are related, did you notice any similarities between their voices and personalities and perspectives? Any stark differences?
10. At the end of the novel, we find out a bit about how Diamond and Ma's relationship evolves in the coming years and decades after the story ends. Use your imagination to fill in some of the details. What do you imagine might bring them together into Diamond's adulthood? What might break them apart?

Author Bio

Essie Chambers earned her MFA in creative writing from Columbia University and has received fellowships from the MacDowell Vermont Studio Center and Baldwin for the Arts. A former film and television executive, she was a producer on the documentary *Descendant*, which was released by the Obamas' Higher Ground production company and Netflix in 2022. *SWIFT RIVER* is her debut novel.

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