The Vanishing Half

by Brit Bennett



About the Book

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE MOTHERS comes a stunning new novel about twin sisters, inseparable as children, who ultimately choose to live in two very different worlds --- one black and one white.

The Vignes twin sisters will always be identical. But after growing up together in a small, southern black community and running away at age 16, it's not just the shape of their daily lives that is different as adults, it's everything: their families, their communities, their racial identities. Many years later, one sister lives with her black daughter in the same southern town she once tried to escape. The other secretly passes for white, and her white husband knows nothing of her past. Still, even separated by so many miles and just as many lies, the fates of the twins remain intertwined. What will happen to the next generation, when their own daughters' storylines intersect?

Weaving together multiple strands and generations of this family, from the Deep South to California, from the 1950s to the 1990s, Brit Bennett produces a story that is at once a riveting, emotional family story and a brilliant exploration of the American history of passing. Looking well beyond issues of race, THE VANISHING HALF considers the lasting influence of the past as it shapes a person's decisions, desires and expectations, and explores some of the multiple reasons and realms in which people sometimes feel pulled to live as something other than their origins.

As with her *New York Times* bestselling debut THE MOTHERS, Brit Bennett offers an engrossing page-turner about family and relationships that is immersive and provocative, compassionate and wise.

Discussion Guide

1. Stella and Desiree Vignes grow up identical and, as children, inseparable. Later, they are not only separated, but lost to each other, completely out of contact. What series of events and experiences leads to this division and why? Was it inevitable, after their growing up so indistinct from each other?

2. When did you notice cracks between the twins begin to form? Do you understand why Stella made the choice she did? What did Stella have to give up, in order to live a different kind of life? Was it necessary to leave Desiree behind? Do you think Stella ultimately regrets her choices? What about Desiree?

3. Consider the various forces that shape the twins into the people they become, and the forces that later shape their respective daughters. In the creation of an individual identity or sense of self, how much influence do you think comes from upbringing, geography, race, gender, class, education? Which of these are mutable and why? Have you ever taken on or discarded aspects of your own identity?

4. Kennedy is born with everything handed to her, Jude with comparatively little. What impact do their relative privileges have on the people they become? How does it affect their relationships with their mothers and their understanding of home? How does it influence the dynamic between them?

5. The town of Mallard is small in size but looms large in the personal histories of its residents. How does the history of this town and its values affect the twins and their parents. How does it affect ?outsiders? like Early and later Jude? Do you understand why Desiree decides to return there as an adult? What does the depiction of Mallard say about who belongs to what communities, and how those communities are formed and enforced?

6. Many of the characters are engaged in a kind of performance at some point in the story. Kennedy makes a profession of acting, and ultimately her fans blur the line between performance and reality when they confuse her with her soap opera character. Barry performs on stage in theatrical costumes that he then removes for his daytime life. Reese takes on a new wardrobe and role, but it isn?t a costume. One could say that Stella?s whole marriage and neighborhood life is a kind of performance. What is the author saying about the roles we perform in the world? Do you ever feel you are performing a role rather than being yourself? How does that compare to what some of these characters are doing? Consider the distinction between performance, reinvention and transformation in respect to the different characters in the book.

7. Desiree?s job as a fingerprint analyst in Washington, DC is to use scientific methods to identify people through physical, genetic details. Why do you think the author chose this as a profession for her character? Where else do you see this theme of identity and identification in the book?

8. Compare and contrast the love relationships in the novel --- Desiree and Early, Stella and Blake, and Reese and Jude. What are their separate relationships with the truth? How much does telling the truth or obscuring it play a part in the functionality of a relationship? How much does the past matter in each case?

9. What does Stella feel she has to lose in California, if she reveals her true identity to her family and her community? When Loretta, a black woman, moves in across the street, what does she represent for Stella? What do Stella?s interactions with Loretta tell us about Stella?s commitment to her new identity?

Author Bio

Born and raised in Southern California, Brit Bennett graduated from Stanford University and later earned her MFA in fiction at the University of Michigan.

Her debut novel, THE MOTHERS, was a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist for both the NBCC John Leonard First Novel Prize and the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction. Her second novel, THE VANISHING HALF, was an instant #1 *New York Times* bestseller, longlisted for the National Book Award, a finalist for the Women?s Prize, and named one of the 10 best books of the year by *The New York Times.*

Bennet has been named a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree, a NAACP Image Award Finalist, and one of *Time?s* Next 100 Influential People. Her essays have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Paris Review* and *Jezebel*.

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