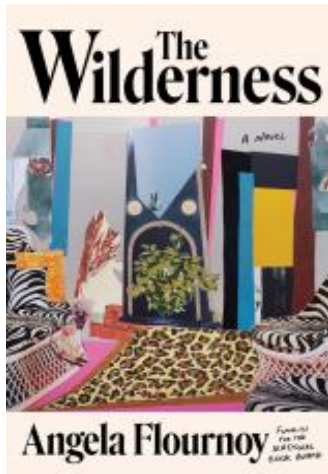


The Wilderness

by Angela Flournoy



About the Book

An era-defining novel about five Black women over the course of their 20-year friendship, as they move through the dizzying and sometimes precarious period between young adulthood and midlife --- in the much-anticipated second book from National Book Award finalist Angela Flournoy.

Desiree, Danielle, January, Monique and Nakia are in their early 20s and at the beginning. Of their careers, of marriage, of motherhood, and of big-city lives in New York and Los Angeles. Together, they are finding their way through the *wilderness*, that period of life when the reality of contemporary adulthood --- overwhelming, mysterious, and full of freedom and consequences --- swoops in and stays.

Desiree and Danielle, sisters whose shared history has done little to prevent their estrangement, nurse bitter family wounds in different ways. January has a relationship with a 'good' man she feels ambivalent about, even after her surprise pregnancy. Monique, a librarian and aspiring blogger, finds unexpected online fame after calling out the university where she works for its plans to whitewash fraught history. And Nakia is trying to get her restaurant off the ground, without relying on the largesse of her upper-middle-class family, who wonder aloud if she should be doing something better with her life.

As these friends move from the late 2000s into the late 2020s, from young adults to grown women, they must figure out what they mean to one another --- amid political upheaval, economic and environmental instability, and the increasing volatility of modern American life.

THE WILDERNESS is Angela Flournoy's masterful and kaleidoscopic follow-up to her critically acclaimed debut, THE TURNER HOUSE. A generational talent, she captures with disarming wit and electric language how the most profound connections over a lifetime can lie in the tangled, uncertain thicket of friendship.

Discussion Guide

1. The passage of time is evident in *THE WILDERNESS* as we follow these five women through their 20-year friendship. Most chapters are dated by the year, but the story is not told in strict chronological order. How does this immersion in and estrangement from time orient or disorient you? How does it give you a fuller picture of womanhood?
2. On page 241, Angela Flournoy writes, "It might not take much for her to end up in the wilderness again." What is the wilderness? Have you experienced it before, or are you experiencing it now?
3. Part Three introduces a dramatic shift in the perspective of the novel: from the third-person to the first-person perspective where the narrator is no longer explicitly named, yet somehow we still know who is speaking. What effect did this have on you?
4. On page 191, after Desiree buys a meal for an unhoused person, January tells her that she should have given him money instead. Have you ever experienced a conflict with a friend that unearthed your own moral code? Did you feel similarly set in your ways, or were you more open-minded?
5. Danielle and Desiree have a strained relationship as sisters, and although they do not speak, they worry about each other and check in on each other indirectly through their friends. What might explain this intensity of feeling but impossibility of saying?
6. Through the book, we see the characters encounter various uprisings in response to social conditions in their cities. How did uprisings during the pandemic or beyond affect the area where you lived? How did they affect your friendships?
7. Desiree laments Nakia leaving New York City for Los Angeles in order to pursue her dreams in the restaurant industry. How do we cope when friends we love move to faraway places? How do we support them even if it means being left behind?
8. Over the course of their 20-year friendship, the women watch each other age and change. Looking back on their younger years as women in their mid-lives enhances the memories they share and the feeling of closeness they experience, even many years later when they are in different locations. How do memories, time and space interact with and change one another? How are these things connected for you?
9. The women engage in sexuality in various ways throughout the novel. How does sexuality liberate and, perhaps, limit them?
10. The rift between Desiree and Danielle is in part due to their respectively complex relationships with their grandfather, Nolan, and the fact that Desiree did not inform her sister that she was aiding in Nolan's wishes to end his own life. Death is a motif in the novel. What kinds of things --- both physical and emotional --- are left behind when a friend or family member, especially an elderly one, dies? How might the surviving relationships change? What duty do we owe to those who have passed, to those who are grieving, and to ourselves?
11. Monique's blog, "Black in the Stacks," offers an exhilarating, first-person account of her career journey and reflections on her questions about the world. What is gained by processing the world through writing about it? Do you

know of any real-life "Black in the Stacks" blogs or voices of today that offer a similar catharsis?

12. January's experiences with pregnancy and motherhood become central to her character's journey throughout the novel and change the way she interacts with her friends. Has becoming a parent or caregiver shifted relationship dynamics in your life?

Author Bio

Angela Flournoy's *The Wilderness* is the first book in her debut novel series, *The Wilderness*. Her fiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New Yorker*.

A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Flournoy has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, The New School, Columbia University, and the University of California, Berkeley.

Flournoy has received fellowships from the New York Public Library Cullman Center for Writers and Scholars, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Book Foundation.

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