Whitegirl

by Kate Manning



About the Book

From its riveting first paragraphs, **Whitegirl** immerses us in a world where truth and lies, love and betrayal, identity and the search for it, are swirling in uncertainty. Charlotte Halsey and Milo Robicheaux began their marriage deeply in love. But now she is unable to speak, recovering from a violent attack that almost took her life. Her husband languishes in jail, accused of trying to murder her. But she doesn't know whether he is the one who attacked her, nor does she know whether to trust any of her memories about their life together. The media have an opinion, as always: Milo is a famous black actor and Olympic ski champion, wed to blonder-than-blond cover girl Charlotte. Now, as she recalls her gentle college friendship with Milo, the abusive boyfriends in her past, and her career as a professional beauty, she tries to understand whether her husband was her salvation or a threat to her very existence. Unfolding in a series of mesmerizing flashbacks, **Whitegirl** offers a revealing look at race, power, and the often-overwhelming nature of attraction.

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your reading of Kate Manning's **Whitegirl**. We hope they will spark interesting conversation about this provocative novel and its themes.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the basis of the attraction between Milo and Charlotte? How does it evolve over time? What do they have in common? Do racial issues necessarily comprise the driving force behind the pain in their relationship?

2. Compare Jack to Milo. What did it cost Charlotte emotionally to date each of them? Did her high-school relationship foreshadow her future with men?

3. Charlotte suffers from lack of confidence. From what sources does she derive her sense of self? How were her values formed? How does her internal life clash with others' perceptions of her?

4. Discuss the character of Milo. What are his values? What tests has he been subjected to? How do these tests form his personality? How does he cope with difficulty?

5. On the first page of the book, Charlotte says, "I was not always a white girl. I used to be just a person. But when I met Milo, I became white. . . ." What does she mean by this? What role does race play in a person's identity? In yours? How is race relevant for people whose race is different from yours?

6. Discuss the two sets of parents described in **Whitegirl**. What are their dreams and fears for their children? What do they teach their children about the realities of our society?

7. What role does Milo's sister Bobbie play in the book? What choices did the two siblings make that caused them to develop such divergent attitudes toward activism and marriage?

8. What role does Darryl Haynes play in the novel? What are his political beliefs and their origins? How much weight do his ideas carry today?

9. Discuss Charlotte's remarks at a Newark housing project and their consequences. Why did they provoke such strong reactions? Why did she speak as she did?

10. Charlotte frequently says, "We never discussed it," about ideas, events, and feelings in her marriage to Milo. What is it they are "not discussing," and why? What are the consequences of this lack of communication?

11. Consider the "crime novel" aspects of **Whitegirl**. If you were a jury member charged with finding Milo guilty or innocent of attempting to murder Charlotte, how would you vote?

12. In the last paragraph of Chapter Ten, Charlotte says, "I was not White then, when I met Milo. I was green. Green and dumb as a grassy lawn." Do you attribute her tragedies to her naïveté? To what extent is her naïveté, especially about race, prevalent in American society today? Do you perceive Charlotte as being an innocent victim or the architect of her own problems?

13. In the book's epigraph, James Baldwin asserts that "people are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them." Is he correct? Did **Whitegirl** change your perception of history, particularly as it applies to members of races other than your own? How is history trapped in us? How are we trapped in it? In what way does **Whitegirl** reflect American society? Your own community?

14. Milo and Charlotte both have tremendously visible careers. Both become objectified, to some extent, by thousands of anonymous voyeurs. What are the effects of this visibility? Of fame? Do all mixed-race couples experience a certain kind of visibility?

15. Do you anticipate more tolerance in the U.S. in the future? What would you predict for Charlotte's two children in terms of racism and relationships?

16. What is the effect of the novel's ending? What do you envision for Charlotte's future?

Author Bio

Kate Manning is the author of GILDED MOUNTAIN, MY NOTORIOUS LIFE and WHITEGIRL. A former documentary television producer and winner of two Emmy Awards, she has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *Time*, *Glamour* and *The Guardian*, among other publications. She has taught creative writing at Bard High School Early College in Manhattan, and lives with her family in New York City.

Critical Praise

"Charlotte's voice ? with wit, with honesty, and a kind heart ? tells a compelling story of a woman's evaporating innocence and search for clarity. **Whitegirl** is a literary and emotional tour de force that also manages to address a real issue: race in America."

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