

Women's Prize for Fiction 2021



2021 SHORTLIST

THE VANISHING HALF by BRIT BENNETT

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in Southern California, Brit Bennett graduated from Stanford University and later earned her MFA in fiction at the University of Michigan, where she won a Hopwood Award in Graduate Short Fiction and the 2014 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers. Her work is featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Paris Review* and *Jezebel*. Bennett's first novel, *The Mothers*, was published in 2016. She is one of the National Book Foundation's 2016 '5 Under 35' honorees. She lives in Los Angeles.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Vignes sisters are identical twins. But after growing up in the small rural southern community of Mallard, where the majority of folk are light skinned, and those with darker black skin are shunned, Stella and Desiree run away, aged sixteen. Years later, one sister lives with her black daughter in the same town she once tried to escape, and across the country, her sister passes for white, her white husband and daughter knowing nothing of her past. Still, though separated by so many miles and just as many lies, the fates of the twins remain intertwined. What will happen when their daughters' stories intersect?

Weaving together multiple stories and generations, from the Deep South to California and from the 1950s to the 1990s, *The Vanishing Half* is a riveting family story and a brilliant exploration of race, gender and identity, and the lasting influence of the past as it shapes a person's desires and expectations.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Many of the characters in *The Vanishing Half* are in some way performing their identity, with Bennett reminding us that who we are and who we say we are sometimes requires repeated performance and commitment. Stella is living as

a white woman in privileged California without having been open about her past and her family to her husband and child: for Stella, that daily performance of whiteness is a strain because of her secret, ensuring that she remains constantly vigilant and fulfils the correct cultural codes: who she socialises with, how she dresses, how she raises her child, what she eats and what she says in public. Stella and Desiree are identical twins, but have very different lives, despite their matching visual identity.



On the other hand, Reese's character becomes more fully himself as he transitions to the identity that he feels is right for him. For Reese, it is entirely more natural for him to be a man, and he "performs" that identity naturally. Reese is finally able to be totally secure in his identity – and secure in his relationship with Jude – when he has had surgery to remove his breasts, thereby removing the last obstacle to the natural performance of who he really is. Like Stella, Reese has transformed himself on the way to California, but unlike Stella, he is open with Jude as to his identity.

Other characters, such as Barry and Kennedy, perform onstage. In Barry's case, the drag costume and identity is strictly for performance, but in Kennedy's case, there is

some confusion, from other people, at least, as to where her on-screen identity as a soap opera actress ends and her real life begins. Kennedy's true identity is one that is hidden even from her (reflected in her somewhat directionless career and difficult relationship with her parents) until Jude reveals the secret of Stella's family and offers Kennedy the link to roots and family her mother has denied her out of fear.

Last, Desiree's job analysing fingerprints in Washington D.C. means that she is involved very literally in identifying others, but she only gets it because she 'passes' for white. Again, in putting Desiree in this difficult position – whether to disclose her identity or not – Bennett explores ideas of performance, transformation and reinvention in her novel, asking us where authenticity lies, and who we really are.

DISCUSSION POINTS

When Loretta Walker and her family move in across the street from Stella, it initiates a deep and uncomfortable confrontation within Stella of her adopted white identity. Fearful that Loretta's presence might in some way unmask her as a woman of colour, Stella is the first to speak up at a community meeting against the Walker family's residency, and she readily takes part in the racist language and conversation around what it will mean for a black family to move onto the street.

Yet, when the Walkers arrive, Loretta represents a link back to her black identity that Stella longs for, and she makes friends with Loretta, becoming part of her card-playing afternoons with her black friends. Stella enjoys Loretta's company, but she is also mindful that she still has to perform her white identity – even within the company of women she should be able to relate to as women of colour – because of her own dishonesty. Finally, there is a terrible climax where Stella tells her daughter not to play with Loretta's daughter, and the Walkers are forced out of the neighbourhood.

Do you sympathise with Stella? What could she have done differently? Given her history and environment, are her decisions understandable or damnable? If she told the truth to her husband and daughter about her history, what do you think would happen?

QUESTIONS

Kennedy and Jude are cousins, but how have their lives differed? Kennedy is more privileged, but Jude seems more well-rounded and happier. Do you feel sorry for Kennedy? Or Jude? Or both?

Is Mallard a good place to live? Why does Desiree go back to live there?

How are Early and Blake the products of their respective environments?

How does Desiree and Early's relationship compare with Desiree and Sam?

NEXT STEPS



THE 2021 WOMEN'S PRIZE
FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

As *The Vanishing Half* is a story about identical twins, research some famous identical twins (or perhaps you have identical twins in your family or friend group) and use what you find out to write a magazine-style article about their lives. Have the twins led very similar or very different lives? Have there been any odd synergies between them, like the sometimes-reported phenomenon of twins 'just knowing' things that the other one is experiencing? An account of twins separated at birth and then finding each other later in life might inspire you.

Alternatively, research any cultural myths surrounding twins, identical or not. What do twins signify in myth and religion? What are some of the better and lesser known mythological twins - Apollo and Artemis, Balder and Hoedur, Castor and Pollux? What are their stories? See if the myths inspire a new story, retold in the modern day.

“ IT LOOKS INTO THE CONSEQUENCES OF RACISM AND ITS EFFECT ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE, HOW IT CAN DETERMINE PEOPLE'S LIFESTYLE CHOICES AND RELATIONSHIPS AND SHAPE THEIR FATE. ”

BERNARDINE EVARISTO
2021 JUDGE

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE MOTHERS by BRIT BENNETT

GOD HELP THE CHILD by TONI MORRISON