

Kin

by Tayari Jones



PLOT SUMMARY

A yearning for their missing mothers pulls Vernice and Annie apart. It will take a devastating tragedy to bring them back together.

Vernice and Annie are ‘cradle friends’, born days apart in Honeysuckle, Louisiana, both destined never to know their mothers. The girls are inseparable, bound by a friendship far deeper than sisterhood. But this is the American South in the 1950s. Black girls like Vernice and Annie have to fight for every opportunity they can, and neither one can build the future they hope for in Honeysuckle.

Gradually, inevitably, the girls drift apart. Vernice pursues her education; Annie is lured by the promise of a heady first love affair and a growing obsession with finding her mother. But her search pulls her even further into a world of danger that soon leaves her oldest friend battling to save her.

Tayari Jones returns with an exuberant, richly told story about mothers, daughters, and a lifelong friendship that is as dangerous as it is unbreakable.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The theme of mothers, nurturing (or a lack of it), and what happens when mothers are absent, is a key theme of *Kin*. As Annie says:

“We were also fatherless, but this didn’t bite the same way. When you don’t have your mother, you don’t really know who you are. Even if you had a bad mother like Babydoll had, you can use her to know what you are not.”

Vernice’s first word, screamed aloud, is “Mother” even though her real mother has been dead for two years, murdered by her father. In her place, Aunt Irene has stepped in to raise her, even though Irene is not the maternal type (“I was tended to, but never mothered.”). Later, when Vernice becomes engaged to Franklin, she gains a very



attentive mother-in-law in Mrs McHenry. However, that love is conditional, as Vernice learns when she asks Mrs McHenry for a doctor for Annie: “Once you escape, you do not want to transfer the squalor of your childhood to your new life.” – to keep her new family, and Mrs McHenry’s nurturing, Vernice has to choose them over helping her cradle friend.

Annie’s young life is characterised by her real mother Hattie Lee’s absence. Finding Hattie becomes an obsession that leads her away from home and to Lulabelle’s brothel, where she washes bloody sheets after illegal and unsafe abortions: for the women at Lulabelle’s, motherhood is something to be feared. Lulabelle and Annie develop a kind of mother-daughter relationship, and it’s Lulabelle that Annie goes to when she becomes pregnant. However, becoming a mother is also what kills Annie.

There are other maternal sources of support in Honeysuckle, Louisiana. Miss Ola Mae is the local midwife and, with her partner Miss Jemison, plays an important role in caring for the children in the town. Jones reminds us that mothering can exist in community as well as by people who did not want to or could not have children themselves.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In *Kin*, Jones represents differing experiences of wealth for black families in the 1950s. Joette Cunningham is from a wealthy family; Vernice, her lover and college room-mate, is poor. Joette, far more privileged than Vernice, calls Spelman College a “hell-hole” while Vernice appreciates everything about being at college. Vernice observes –

“Joette... longed for the freedom of being an outsider, but only people who have never been shut out think this is how it works.”

Mrs McHenry, a poor girl married into a wealthy family, observes that the McHenry wealth has allowed them to move into a primarily white neighbourhood. However, Mrs McHenry drinks, and as Vernice gets to know her, she realises that there are tensions underneath the surface of the apparently picture-perfect life. By contrast, Lulabelle is financially independent, but is a brothel-keeper.

What is Jones saying about women and money and the independence – or lack of – it might lend? Does money always improve women’s lives in the book? What does wealth enable black characters to do and not do? How does it change them?

QUESTIONS

How does Jones represent belief and religion in *Kin*? How does Christianity sit alongside traditional beliefs, e.g. putting home dirt in your bag to make you return?



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Clyde, Bobo, Annie and Babydoll use the Green Book on their travels to provide them with supposedly safe driving routes and stopping places for black people during segregation. Does the Green Book keep them safe? How does Jones show the danger of travelling as a black person?

Marylinda offers to get Vernice's luggage back for her because she can pass as white. How does Jones explore the concept of "passing" in *Kin*?

How is sexuality explored in the book? What does it mean for Vernice to be a young bisexual black woman in 1950s Louisiana?

NEXT STEPS

The "haint" that lives in the wooden shack at Lulabell's brothel – that Lulabell claims is the spirit of her mother – is a fantastic subject for a ghost story. Using the first person, tell the story of the spirit – what she sees, what she hears, how she died, and why she's haunting the shack. Does she have a distinctive voice or favourite phrases? How might a "haint" see the world?

Alternatively, imagine if Hattie Lee had written a letter to Annie. Hattie does come to see Annie at the bar, just before Annie dies, but they don't say much to each other. Instead, what do you think Hattie Lee might have wanted to say to Annie? What might she tell her about her life with her other child, also called Annie Kay? Would she explain why she names her second child after her first? Would she explain why she left Honeysuckle? Choose whether the tone of the letter is angry, regretful, cheerful or wise. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tayari Jones is the internationally bestselling author of five novels, including *An American Marriage*, which won the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction, *Leaving Atlanta*, *The Untelling*, *Silver Sparrow*, and her most recent book, *Kin*. Jones is the recipient of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, a United States Artist Fellowship, NEA Fellowship, and a Radcliffe Institute Bunting Fellowship.





RECOMMENDED READS

In *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones examines the effects of a wrongful conviction on a young African-American couple.

In *With Love From Harlem*, Reshonda Tate presents a novel inspired by beloved Harlem jazz performer, Hazel Scott. Set in 1940s and 1950s Harlem, the novel explores Hazel's rise to fame amid the civil rights movement.

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