

The  
Seattle  
Public  
Library



seattle  
reads

# The Vanishing Half

by Brit Bennett



[www.spl.org/SeattleReads](http://www.spl.org/SeattleReads)

# Table of Contents

Land Acknowledgement .....2

About **The Vanishing Half** and Author Brit Bennett ..... 3-4

Suggested Discussion Questions ..... 5-6

Suggested Further Reading and Watching ..... 7-12

About the Artist..... 13

Notes..... 14

Seattle Reads Selections 1998-2021 ..... 15

About Seattle Reads ..... 15



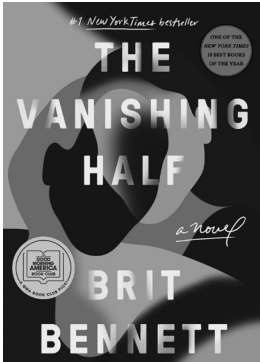
# Land Acknowledgement

**ʔəskʷədiitəb ʔə tiil Seattle Public Library txʷəl dxʷʔačəl ʔal tiil swatixʷtəd  
ʔə tiil txʷəlšucid ʔaciltalbiḡʷ tulʼal tudiʔ tuhaʔkʷ.**

The Seattle Public Library is on Indigenous land. These are the traditional unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, specifically the Duwamish people.



# About The Vanishing Half



From The New York Times-bestselling author of **The Mothers**, 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 sixteen, 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.

# About Brit Bennett



Born and raised in Southern California, Brit Bennett graduated from Stanford University and earned her MFA in fiction at the University of Michigan, where she won a Hopwood Award in Graduate Short Fiction as well as the 2014 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers. She is a National Book Foundation “5 under 35” honoree, and her essays are featured in **The New Yorker**, **The New York Times Magazine**, **The Paris Review**, and **Jezebel**.

## Seattle Reads: The Vanishing Half Events

**Brit Bennett** talks with **Jazmyn Scott**

6 p.m. Wednesday, October 6

---

**African-American Writers' Alliance Showcase:**

Join us for a showcase of local voices, celebrating the poetry and prose of the African-American Writers' Alliance.

2 - 4 p.m. Sunday, October 10

---

Register for these digital events at [www.spl.org/SeattleReads](http://www.spl.org/SeattleReads)



# Suggested Discussion Questions

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?
3. What did Stella have to give up, in order to live a different kind of life? Was it necessary to leave Desiree behind?
4. Do you think Stella ultimately regrets her choices? What about Desiree?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?

8. What does the depiction of Mallard say about who belongs to what communities, and how those communities are formed and enforced?
9. 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. Consider the distinction between performance, reinvention, and transformation in respect to the different characters in the book.
10. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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?
13. 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?

# Suggested Reading

The titles below explore many of the themes within **The Vanishing Half**: multigenerational stories, sibling relationships, the intergenerational impacts of anti-Blackness, internalized Colorism/Shadism, code switching, and the social/cultural politics of Jim Crow south. We acknowledge that anti-Blackness is embedded within stories of “passing,” by focusing on characters’ proximity to Whiteness, and have also tried to include books that examine and celebrate other Black lived experiences.

## Fiction

### **What’s Mine and Yours** by Naima Coster

Two families collide in the setting of a recently integrated school. From one family comes a Black boy who just started to attend the school. From the other family comes a young girl whose mother prefers she pass as White and hide that she’s Latina.

### **Invisible Man** by Ralph Ellison

A young Black man moves from the Deep South to Harlem and experiences a disturbing sense of disconnection to the world around him.

### **The Turner House** by Angela Flournoy

In this portrait of an African American family, the sale of their childhood home prompts Cha-Cha, the eldest of the 13 adult Turner children, Troy the youngest, and middle child Lelah to discuss a pivotal moment from their childhood, revealing the complex workings of a large family and throwing into relief personal decisions, disappointments, and hopes.

### **Passing** by Nella Larson

Irene and Claire, old school friends, both pass as White, having left their Black families and neighborhoods behind. But when one of them begins to exhibit behavior that draws too much attention, the other begins to worry for her carefully crafted lie of a life.



**The Bluest Eye** by Toni Morrison

In this classic novel, Pecola Breedlove is a young Black girl who believes that if she had blue eyes the world would love her and treat her better.

**The Joy Luck Club** by Amy Tan

Four women immigrated from China to San Francisco and became friends, and each raised a daughter. As mothers and daughters recount moments from their lives, portraits emerge: pivotal moments, remembered differently; legacies; misunderstandings; and persistent familial bonds.

**The Gilded Years** by Karin Tanabe

Reimagining the story of Anita Hemmings, the first Black woman to graduate Vassar College, Anita passes for a White student, which works fine until she meets a handsome fellow student named Porter, falls in love, and finds herself living two very separate lives.

**The Blacker the Berry** by Wallace Thurman

Emma Lou has the darkest skin of all the members of her family, a reality that leaves her feeling unloved and rejected by the world in which she grew up. A visit to Harlem, however, opens the door to an array of experiences that require her to make use of the survival skills she's developed.

**Mrs. Everything** by Jennifer Weiner

Two Jewish sisters wrestle with identity, sexuality, and changing social expectations as they take radically different paths in pursuit of personal happiness, set against the backdrop of big social change in the 20th and 21st centuries.

# Suggested Reading

## Fiction Continued

### **A Kind of Freedom** by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton

Over 70 years, three generations of an African American family pursue happiness – indeed, a kind of freedom – in a New Orleans where the reality and legacy of Jim Crow laws, and issues of colorism and class, impact their available choices.

### **Red at the Bone** by Jacqueline Woodson

Following a multigenerational Black family who set about celebrating their youngest member's 16th birthday, this novel delves into the family's history and experiences with class and race that lead them to their present moment.

## Non-Fiction

### **An Illuminated Life: Belle da Costa Greene's Journey from Prejudice to Privilege** by Heidi Ardizzone

The first curator of the breathtaking J.P. Morgan Library, Belle da Costa Greene led an outsized life hobnobbing with the rich and famous in Gilded Age New York, all the while masking her Black heritage behind a fabricated Portuguese ancestry.

### **One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race** by Yaba Blay

This wide-ranging collection of seventy photo-essays explores the shifting perceptions and lived experiences of racial identity in an increasingly heterogeneous yet still deeply biased America.

### **The Yellow House** by Sarah Broom

With her mother's house in New Orleans as a focal point, memoirist Broom examines her relationships with her twelve siblings and their interpretations of home, both literal and figurative, in this National Book Award winner.

**One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life: A Story of Race and Hidden Secrets** by Bliss Broyard

Shortly before his death, she learned her father Anatole Broyard was the descendant of Black and Creole ancestors, sending her on an odyssey to New Orleans to recover her lost relations, and better understand her father's success and the self-hatred that lay beneath it.

**Loving: Interracial Intimacy in America and the Threat to White Supremacy** by Sheryll Cashin

White supremacy in America has been propped up by many laws, chief among them those forbidding marriage across racial lines. Cashin takes a long look at four centuries of shifting norms and practices leading up to and following the landmark 1967 case of Loving v. Virginia.

**Playing Dead: A Journey through the World of Death Fraud** by Elizabeth Greenwood

"Weirdly helpful" is how Brit Bennett described this intriguing exploration of how actual people have faked their own deaths, vanishing their past selves to be reborn into new, chosen identities.

**A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life** by Allyson Vanessa Hobbs

What factors lead persons of African American ancestry to cross the color line, and what do they lose in the process? Hobbs eye-opening social history explores the stories of individuals whose experiences expose the illusory nature of the concept of race.

**Negroland** by Margo Jefferson

Among Bennett's influences while writing the novel, she cites Jefferson's thoughtful and candid memoir of growing up in an elite Black Chicago enclave, a world of light skinned privilege where upward mobility was the norm, rather than the exception.

# Suggested Reading

## Non-Fiction Continued

### **Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery** by Mat Johnson

Inspired by the real-life exploits of Walter White, the light-skinned NAACP official who passed among whites to investigate lynching in the Depression era South, this gritty black and white graphic novel tells a harrowing story of bravery in the face of murder, intrigue and mob violence.

### **White Like Her: My Family's Story of Race and Racial Passing**

by Gail Lukasik

Her mother began passing as White when she met her father, but little guessed just how much she stood to lose by this act of radical self-reinvention. Years later, against her mother's wishes, a daughter strives to recover her heritage and embrace her true identity.

### **Black Imagination**, Natasha Marin, Editor

Incantatory and inspiring, this kaleidoscopic collection of art, poetry, thoughts, visions and moments reflects the lavish diversity and richness of Black lives, identities and voices today.

### **The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White** by Daniel J. Sharfstein

For many Americans of African descent, upward mobility has meant racial fluidity, as witnessed in three keenly observed and thoughtful case studies of how Blacks have parlayed intermarriage, wealth and the wilderness into better prospects for themselves and their families.

### **We Wear the Mask: 15 True Stories of Passing in America**

Brando Skyhorse and Lisa Page, Editors

Every day, many of us "pass" – or are passed by others - as a different race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, or class. This diverse collection examines the meaning and experience of this most pointed form of American metamorphosis and mobility.

## **Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity**

by C. Riley Snorton

Highlighting the complex interrelationship between race and gender, this incisive study examines intersecting identities and erasures of transgender people of color from the mid-19th century to the present.

## **When I Was White** by Sarah Valentine

Raised never to question her parentage in an Irish/Italian household in Pittsburgh, the author describes the profoundly unsettling experience of trying to live her parents' lie, even as the truth of her biracial ancestry was becoming obvious to those around her.

## **Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race**

by Thomas Chatterton Williams

Provocative and thought-provoking essays candidly explore the author's own racial identity and that of his biracial children, and the degree to which race, existing largely in the eye of the beholder, may be transcended.

## **Films and TV:**

Interested in exploring more about the themes from **The Vanishing Half**? Check out these films and TV shows suggested by our librarians:

**[www.spl.org/VanishingHalfWatchList](http://www.spl.org/VanishingHalfWatchList)**

# About the Artist Shina-Olga Diadhiou



Shina's Gallery is an Afrocentric art gallery founded in 2018. When Shina moved to the US from Cote d'Ivoire, she noticed a significant lack of African representation in the art world. Today, she represents her culture and heritage through multimedia art such as art painting, resin art and more.

You can follow her journey on Instagram @shinasgallery and see her artwork at [www.shinasgallery.com](http://www.shinasgallery.com)





## Seattle Reads Through the Years

- 2021:** **The Vanishing Half** by Brit Bennett (Riverhead, 2020)
- 2020:** **There There** by Tommy Orange (Vintage, 2019)
- 2019:** **The Best We Could Do** by Thi Bui (Abrams Books, 2017)
- 2018:** **Homegoing** by Yaa Gyasi (Vintage Books, 2017)
- 2017:** **The Turner House** by Angela Flournoy (Mariner Books, 2016)
- 2016:** **We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves** by Karen Joy Fowler (Plume Books, 2013)
- 2015:** **The Painter** by Peter Heller (Vintage Books, 2015)
- 2014:** **For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet's Journey** by Richard Blanco (Beacon Press, 2013)
- 2013:** **Stories for Boys** by Gregory Martin (Hawthorne Books, 2012)
- 2012:** **The Submission** by Amy Waldman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)
- 2011:** **Little Bee** by Chris Cleave (Simon and Schuster, 2009)
- 2010:** **Secret Son** by Laila Lalami (Algonquin Books, 2009)
- 2009:** **My Jim** by Nancy Rawles (Three Rivers Press, 2005)
- 2008:** **The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears** by Dinaw Mengestu (Riverhead Books, 2007)
- 2007:** **The Namesake** by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books, 2003)
- 2006:** **Persepolis** by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon Books, 2003)
- 2005:** **When the Emperor Was Divine** by Julie Otsuka (Anchor Books, 2002)
- 2004:** **Seattle Reads** Isabel Allende
- 2003:** **A Gesture Life** by Chang-rae Lee (Riverhead Books, 1999)
- 2002:** **Wild Life** by Molly Gloss (Mariner Books, 2001)
- 2001:** **Fooling with Words: A Celebration of Poets and Their Craft** by Bill Moyers (Morrow, 1999)
- 1999:** **A Lesson Before Dying** by Ernest Gaines (Vintage Books, 1994)
- 1998:** **The Sweet Hereafter** by Russell Banks (HarperCollins, 1991)

Seattle Reads is a city-wide book group, where people are encouraged to read and discuss the same book. Seattle Reads **The Vanishing Half** is presented in partnership with the African-American Writers' Alliance, LANGSTON, Northwest African American Museum, and Wa Na Wari. It is made possible by The Seattle Public Library Foundation and The Wallace Foundation, with additional support from media sponsor The Seattle Times, Riverhead Books and Penguin Random House.

Contributors to this guide include Stesha Brandon, el evans, Andrea Gough, Linda Johns, Danny Ramirez, Misha Stone, Annie Vasquez, Richard Visick, Carletta Wilson, Elizabeth Windsor, and David Wright.

Thanks to our community advisors: L. Patrice Bell, Minnie Collins, Elisheba Johnson, Stephanie Johnson-Toliver, Georgia McDade, ChrisTiana Obeyesunmer and Jazmyn Scott.