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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The Girl Who Fell from the Sky

by

Heidi Durrow

(Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010)

Author: Heidi W. Durrow is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* (Algonquin Books), which received writer Barbara Kingsolver's 2008 Bellwether Prize for Literature of Social Change, and is already a book club favorite. *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* has been hailed as one of the Best Novels of 2010 by the *Washington Post*, a Top 10 Book of 2010 by *The Oregonian*, a Top 10 Buzz Book of 2010 by the *Boston Herald* and named a Top 10 Debut of 2010 by *Booklist*. *Ebony Magazine* named Heidi as one of its Power 100 Leaders of 2010 along with writers Edwidge Danticat, Malcolm Gladwell and Ntozake Shange. Heidi was nominated for an 2011 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Debut.

Heidi W. Durrow is a graduate of *Stanford, Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism* and *Yale Law School*. Originally from Portland, Oregon, Heidi has worked as a corporate litigator at *Cravath, Swaine & Moore*, and as a Life Skills trainer to professional athletes of the *National Football League* and *National Basketball Association*. She is the co-host of the award-winning weekly podcast *Mixed Chicks Chat*; and the co-founder and co-producer of the *Mixed Roots Film & Literary Festival*, an annual free public event, that celebrates stories of the Mixed experience. She is an occasional essay contributor to *National Public Radio*.

She is the recipient of a Fellowship in Fiction from the *New York Foundation for the Arts*, a *Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Writers*, a *Jentel Foundation Residency*, and won top honors in the *Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition* and the *Chapter One Fiction Contest*. She has received grants from the *Elizabeth George Foundation*, the *American Scandinavian Foundation*, the *Roth Endowment* and the *American Antiquarian Society*. She has also received Fellowships to the *Norman Mailer Writers' Colony* and the *Bread Loaf Writer's Conference*.

Durrow's writing has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Callaloo*, *Poem/Memoir/Story*, the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, *Essence magazine*, and *Newsday*. [From <http://heidiwdurrow.com>]

Summary: This debut novel tells the story of Rachel, the daughter of a Danish mother and a black G.I. who becomes the sole survivor of a family tragedy.

With her strict African American grandmother as her new guardian, Rachel moves to a mostly black community, where her light brown skin, blue eyes, and beauty bring mixed attention her way. Growing up in the 1980s, she learns to swallow her overwhelming grief and confronts her identity as a biracial young woman in a world that wants to see her as either black or white. Meanwhile, a mystery unfolds, revealing the terrible truth about Rachel's last morning on a Chicago rooftop. Interwoven are the voices of Jamie, a neighborhood boy who witnessed the events, and Laronne, a friend of Rachel's mother. Inspired by a true story of a mother's twisted love, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* reveals an unfathomable past and explores issues of identity at a time when many people are asking "Must race confine us and define us?"

In the tradition of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*, here is a portrait of a young girl—and society's ideas of race, class, and beauty. [From <http://heidiwdurrow.com>]

Questions:

1. What is Rachel's central dilemma?
2. What prevented Nella from returning to her family in Denmark?
3. Why does Brick become fascinated with Rachel? What does he ultimately hope for his relationship with her?
4. How do you make sense of Roger's absence from his daughter's life?
5. Why does Rachel develop such a strong bond with Aunt Loretta?
6. Grandma is a church-going woman. But what is most important to her about her religion? What does she want Rachel to value about religion?
7. What does Rachel make of being told she's beautiful?
8. "Grandma's dreams come from hearing about Up North when she was growing up in Texas on a farm, on a road that had no name. Grandma's dream is bigger than her life. I guess at Mor's dreams; having a husband, a family, love. That's the way I would list them. But then I think about it again—her dream maybe was feeling the way she felt with Doug—the way she would smile easy; she would laugh easy; she would play. At least at first. Then the sky in her dream got low too." How would you describe Grandma's dreams? Nella's? Rachel's?
9. If Rachel had a theme song, what would it be?
10. What difference, if any, does it make knowing that the book is inspired by a real event?
11. Do you think that in the age of Obama, biracial/bicultural people will continue to experience the same kinds of stereotypes and stigma that Rachel did?

[From <http://heidiwdurrow.com>]