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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Silver Sparrow

by

Tayari Jones

(Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2011)

Author:

Tayari Jones was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia where she spent most of her childhood with the exception of the one year she and her family spent in Nigeria. Although she has not lived in her hometown for over a decade, much of her writing centers on the urban south. “Although I now live in the northeast,” she explains, “my imagination lives in Atlanta.” [From the author’s web site]

Summary:

With the opening line of *Silver Sparrow*, “My father, James Witherspoon is a bigamist,” Tayari Jones unveils a breathtaking story about a man’s deception, a family’s complicity, and the teenage girls caught in the middle.

Set in a middle-class neighborhood in Atlanta in the 1980s, the novel revolves around James Witherspoon’s families— the public one and the secret one. When the daughters from each family meet and form a friendship, only one of them knows they are sisters. It is a relationship destined to explode when secrets are revealed and illusions shattered. As Jones explores the back stories of her rich and flawed characters, she also reveals the joy, and the destruction, they brought to each other’s lives.

At the heart of it all are the two girls whose lives are at stake, and like the best writers, Jones portrays the fragility of her characters with raw authenticity as they seek love, demand attention, and try to imagine themselves as women.

Questions:

1. Could this story have had a happy ending?
2. Dana and Chaurisse both tell stories of what happened before they were born. What did you think of this technique? Are there stories about things that you cannot possibly remember that you feel almost like you witnessed?
3. There are many moments of truth in *SILVER SPARROW*. What should Gwen have done when she discovered her pregnancy?
4. Gwen tells Dana that they have an advantage over Laverne and Chaurisse because they know the truth. Is this true?

5. Should Gwen have married Raleigh when she had the chance?
6. Is it possible to have a healthy relationship that is not monogamous?
7. There is so much talk these days about fatherhood—contrasting the deadbeat dad with the Bill Cosby-type father. How do you evaluate James Witherspoon, who is both?
8. Is Laverne’s life better or worse for having married James? What about Gwen?
9. Why do you think Raleigh is so loyal to James? Is this devotion warranted?
10. Tayari Jones often writes about the way real people interact with history, for example Gwen’s feelings about the death of Martin Luther King. What do you think of this technique? Have you interacted with history? How did it affect your personal story.
11. In the chapter, “Love and Happiness” there is an appearance of an actual historical figure—the woman who threw the grits on Al Green. Were you familiar with this story? If you were, did this chapter change your understanding of it?
12. Which of the characters was your favorite? Who would you like to know more about?

[From the author’s web site]