

The Mothers by Brit Bennett

Author Bio:

Birth—ca. 1989-90

- Raised—Oceanside, California, USA
- Education—B.A., Stanford University; M.F.A., University of Michigan
- Currently—lives in Encino, California

Brit Bennett is an American author whose debut novel, *The Mothers*, was published in 2016. The novel is a coming-of-age story surrounding a trio of black teens growing up in southern California.

Bennett grew up in Oceanside in southern California. She is the youngest of three sisters. Their father was Oceanside's first black city attorney, and their mother a finger-print analyst for the country sheriff's department.

Bennett recalls herself as a serious, driven child, who started writing when she was 7 or 8. Her efforts resulted in a play about a coyote and short story about a Native American boy whose home is destroyed.

While she was only 17, she began writing *The Mothers*—she was the same age as the book's protagonist, Nadia Turner. Like Nadia, Bennett was smart and ambitious and eager to get out of the city where she grew up.

My mom grew up sharecropping in Louisiana, and my dad grew up in South Central L.A., and both of them were able to scratch and claw and go to college, so what's my excuse?

Bennett did leave town. She attended Stanford University, where she received her B.A. in English. Later, she earned an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan. Bennett says she felt out of place in Michigan—she was a southern California girl suffering through Midwestern winters and wrestling with the culture shock of being in a mostly white environment.

At the time that Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, were killed at the hands of the police, Bennett was completing a writing fellowship at Michigan. Not long after the court cases absolved the policemen involved in the killings, Bennett wrote an essay for the webwite Jezebel, entitled "I Don't Know What to Do With Good White People."

The essay was viewed more than 1 million times in 3 days and drew the attention of a literary agent who emailed her wanting to know if Bennett wanted to write a book. The rest is history. (*Adapted from a [New York Times article](#).*)

Discussion Questions:

1. To what degree do you think Nadia's discomfort about her ambition is just in her head, and to what degree do you think her community sees her as an outsider because of it? Why is leaving home so revolutionary for Nadia? What can her academic accomplishments give her that her home community cannot?

2. Nadia and Luke are two black teens who go to a mostly white school, on the edge of a military base. When Luke ends up in the hospital, he becomes conscious of how a Hispanic male nurse suffers from others' stereotypes. How does the author approach identity in relation to race? How must Nadia change the way she interacts with people inside or outside of her community?

3. *The Mothers* strives to handle teen pregnancy with compassion and wisdom, portraying it as a life-transforming experience with incalculable ramifications. Why do you think Nadia makes the choices she does? How do these choices affect her life, Luke's life, and even the larger community?

4. After his football injury, Luke must struggle to redefine his own sense of himself, his potential and expectations. Later in the book he befriends a male physical therapist who shows Luke that he, too, has the potential for ministering to the sick or injured—which is a sort of “mothering” in itself. How does Luke's sense of masculinity change, before and after his injury? How does the author explore masculinity in the depiction of Nadia's father, a professional military man who must learn to connect with his daughter? Do you think that, in the end, both father and daughter have found a way to communicate and show their love to each other?

5. The novel has a distinct nucleus, made up of “The Mothers,” the elderly women of the black church community who watch over the small-town goings-on with a presence that evokes the tone of a fable. Their chorus, Greek in format, shows the insularity and defiance of a small, loving community. How do “The Mothers” embody their community? In what ways do they impose their own experiences—their beliefs, their upbringings, their age—on the younger generation?

6. Another focus of the book is Nadia's relationship with her best friend, Aubrey, as they help each other through adolescence and motherlessness. It provides poignant commentary about the ways women rely on one another, and about the necessity of navigating hard truths with the people we love. How do Nadia and Aubrey change over the course of the book—both within their friendship and outside of it? What does this friendship give each of the girls?

7. As Nadia maneuvers the adolescent world and beyond, how does her grief over her mother's death change her? Do you think it ultimately strengthens her? Weakens her?
(Questions adapted from the publisher's Teacher's Guide.)

Reviews:

The Mothers is a lush book, a book of so many secrets, betrayals and reckonings that to spill them in the lines of a review instead of letting them play out as the author intended would be silly. Instead I will tell you this: Despite Bennett's thrumming plot, despite the snap of her pacing, it's the always deepening complexity of her characters that provides the book's urgency. Bennett's ability to unwind them gently, offering insights both shocking and revelatory, has a striking effect. I found myself reading not to find out what happens to the characters, but to find out who they are.

Mira Jacob - New York Times

[B]rilliant...a trio of young people coming of age under the shadow of harsh circumstances in a black community in Southern California. Deftly juggling multiple issues, Bennett addresses the subjects—abortion, infidelity, religious faith, and hypocrisy, race—head-on.... [E]xquisitely developed.

Publishers Weekly

In a contemporary black community in Southern California, 17-year-old Nadia Turner and 21-year-old Luke Sheppard launch a soulful affair.... [T]he decisions they make when Nadia becomes pregnant will reverberate throughout their lives..

Library Journal

The tangled destinies of three kids growing up in a tightknit African-American community in Southern California.... Far from reliably offering love, protection, and care, in this book, the mothers cause all the trouble. A wise and sad coming-of-age story showing how people are shaped by their losses.

Kirkus Reviews

Summary:

Set within a contemporary black community in Southern California, Brit Bennett's mesmerizing first novel is an emotionally perceptive story about community, love, and ambition.

It begins with a secret.

"All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season."

It is the last season of high school life for Nadia Turner, a rebellious, grief-stricken, seventeen-year-old beauty. Mourning her own mother's recent suicide, she takes up with the local pastor's son. Luke Sheppard is twenty-one, a former football star whose injury has reduced him to waiting tables at a diner. They are young; it's not serious.

But the pregnancy that results from this teen romance—and the subsequent cover-up—will have an impact that goes far beyond their youth. As Nadia hides her secret from everyone, including Aubrey, her God-fearing best friend, the years move quickly.

Soon, Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey are full-fledged adults and still living in debt to the choices they made that one seaside summer, caught in a love triangle they must carefully maneuver, and dogged by the constant, nagging question: What if they had chosen differently? The possibilities of the road not taken are a relentless haunt.

In entrancing, lyrical prose, *The Mothers* asks whether a "what if" can be more powerful than an experience itself. If, as time passes, we must always live in servitude to the decisions of our younger selves, to the communities that have parented us, and to the decisions we make that shape our lives forever. (*From the publisher.*)