

Bennett, Brit. *The Vanishing Half: A Novel*

Riverhead Books, 2020, pp. 352.

On August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a white police officer named Darren Wilson fatally shot an unarmed black 18-year-old Michael Brown. Dozens of protests erupted in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. These protests were largely organic and not called by a specific group, but they soon gave birth to a movement that is now known as Black Lives Matter. It was around this time that Brit Bennett wrote an essay called “I Don’t Know What to Do with Good White People” in which she explains the struggles of being Black surrounded by white people that claim to be allies but persist in perpetuating racist behaviour. In 2020, Black Lives Matter protests broke out across the U.S. once again, in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. With racial tensions at an all-time high, *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett serves as a timely commentary on race, identity, and passing.

In her second book, Bennett documents the struggles of young Black Americans in a world that does not accept them for who they are. The story is about Desiree and Stella, identical twin sisters, who grew up in a small black community, in a fictitious town in the Jim Crow South. The black inhabitants of the town strive to marry lighter in an attempt to dilute their blackness, “like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before.” The twins decide to run away from home together at sixteen, one sister leaves the other behind and chooses to pass as white; the other ends up back in their hometown with her dark-skinned daughter in tow, a result of a marriage with a black man. The choices each sister makes not only alter the course of their own lives but that of their children as well. The emerging narrative spans four decades, from the 1950s through the 1980s, extending across America and incorporating a wide network of friends and family. The narrative is non-linear and

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is told from the perspective of the two main characters and their respective daughters.

The book explores whiteness and asks whether skin colour is just an observation, a trait, or an institution that allows more economic benefits and political authority to some. Stella, in her quest to fit in, surrounds herself with white people. Unlike the white men that lynched her father to death, these white people are upper class, well mannered, and moderate. While she loses herself and her connection to her sister, by passing as a white woman, Stella gains status, safety, and all the things she desired as a child growing up in the era of segregation.

Racial discrimination is not an anomaly in the American society. As a matter of fact, the disparities we observe today between Black and White communities in the US are a result of a long history of discriminatory and dehumanising laws that have been built into the fundamental structures of the American society that have implications for housing, education, and healthcare, to name a few. These discriminatory laws form the foundation of structural racism, an overarching system of racial bias that favours White people and prevents Black people from accessing opportunities or gaining upward mobility.

In *The Vanishing Half*, Bennett not only validates the social implications of racism but also questions the very concept of 'whiteness'. A question Bennett seems to be asking her readers after Stella's passing is: "What does it mean to be white?". Her white-passing life is rocked by The Walkers- a Black family that move into the mansion across the street from Stella's, in an affluent all-white neighbourhood. Stella is part of the resistance that The Walkers face while moving and integrating into this gated Estate. She reifies the racial hierarchies of American society where white privilege considers a certain group of people as the gatekeepers of economic benefits, social standing, and political authority. Loretta Walker lives in a beautiful home, in a rich neighbourhood and she is unapologetically Black. What did Stella truly gain then from passing as white?

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The Vanishing Half is full of characters that seem to find themselves at the mercy of race, class, and identity. What is particularly appealing about the book is that Bennett does not use tragedy or cruelty as an act to create drama or facilitate plot twists. Instead, such events are deeply tied to the characters' lives, reflecting the impact they have on how a character feels, reacts, or alters their personality. The story touches upon feminism, civil rights, gender identity, and social inequity in the American society, without demonising any single group. The book leaves a lasting impression on the reader and even though the ending is not happy, it is realistic!

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