***The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett**

**Agenda/some discussion questions**

Author, Brit Bennett’s background: Age 31, grew up in CA. 2nd book. Parents lawyers, but one generation from sharecroppers and segregated schools.

Ask for overall reaction to the story, or use questions to begin discussion.

1. Let’s begin by talking about what the title means in the context of this story.
2. The story starts off with Desiree returning home to Mallard, Louisiana after running away at age 16 with her twin sister Stella. In many ways, the town is another character to the story. 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?
3. When Stella and Desiree grew up, there were always together, even referred to as the twins instead of their names. When did you notice cracks between the twins begin to form? How were the twins different from each other?
4. Do you understand why Stella made the choice she did? What did Stella have to give up, in order to live a different kind of life?

1. Stella thinks about “passing” and that at first it seemed so simple, she wondered why her parents didn’t. “She hadn’t realized how long it takes to become somebody else, or how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you.”
2. 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? If they would have actually developed a true friendship, do you think Stella would have ever told her neighbor Loretta the truth about who she really is? Do you think Loretta suspected anything about Stella?
3. What do Stella’s interactions with Loretta tell us about Stella’s commitment to her new identity? How did Loretta help Stella?
4. 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?
5. How did you see colorism demonstrated in the characters of this story? (Desiree’s husband Sam, Kennedy, Frantz, Stella)
6. 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.

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? Consider the distinction between performance, reinvention, and transformation in respect to the different characters in the book.

1. Desiree dealt with horrible abuse but once she gets away, she’s content with Early and loves her daughter. Do you think Desiree ended up having the better life?

1. 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?
2. Why did Stella finally decide to go home? What did you think about the reunion of Desiree and Stella? Why didn’t Stella stay longer?
3. 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?
4. Kennedy knows the truth and thinks her mother showed her love by lying and in turn, Kennedy does the same. What did she mean by that?
5. What did you think about the ending? Were you happy to see Desiree finally leave Mallard?
6. What did you gain by reading this book? #crimingwhilewhite
7. Desiree and Stella’s father is murdered by white men in a horrific crime that sees no justice. This tragedy impacted the sisters in different ways. Let’s discuss this.