



BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Having been sheltered her entire life, Suzette is gaining new skills and a greater understanding of her family and friends, and she must finally face the ways people in her life see her. Discuss how Suzette actively learns more about the world around her and accomplishes her goals. Discuss the ways in which the people around her helped or hindered her from reaching those goals. How did her relationships with those people evolve?
2. Maple's story examines three very different women: Maple, Momi, and Nana. In what ways do Maple and her grandmother approach their grief differently? Why do you think that is, and what could they learn from each other?
3. Discuss how Agnes's relationship with her sister, Berniece, shapes her life. What does she gain from the relationship and how does their relationship hurt her?
4. Discuss the way Agnes's section being written in the third person informed how you thought of her.
5. Compare and contrast Suzette's, Maple's, and Agnes's different relationships to themselves, their attitudes towards self-love and acceptance, and the ways they take on other's perceptions of them as women with albinism.
6. From losing her virginity to Doni and kissing her best friend, Drina, discuss the evolution of Suzette's sexual exploration. What are the similarities and differences in what drives Suzette, Maple, and Agnes's needs and desires?

7. Discuss the ways in which Chad helps Maple as she copes with the loss of her mother. What lessons about grief, loss, and life does she gain, and how was Chad able to help her do so?
8. Compare and contrast Agnes's relationship with Colin versus Prime. How does her relationship with these men affect how she sees herself?
9. Discuss the ways in which the men in Suzette's, Maple's, and Agnes's lives help or hinder them from reaching their goals.
10. All three women have difficult, fractured relationships with their parental figures. Discuss your thoughts on the strength of those family ties versus the ways Suzette, Maple, and Agnes perceive them?
11. Nobody's Magic takes place in Shreveport, Louisiana. How do you think the setting shapes the characters and events of the story? In what ways do you think the novel would be different if it took place somewhere else?

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A CONVERSATION WITH DESTINY O. BIRDSONG

1What inspired you to write *Nobody's Magic*, and why tell the story in three parts?

Nobody's Magic began with a joke I told to a friend while I was working as a grader for high school exams in Salt Lake City during the summer of 2019. The grading area is such an austere space, and I said, "It'd be wild if someone just lost it in here." Later that day, the first lines of "Mind the Prompt" came to me, and even after I got back from Utah, the idea stayed, so I said, "Fine, I'll write a short story." I thought it would simply be a one-off thing. But the "short" story came out long—more than forty pages—and my first readers kept telling me it could be longer. By that time, I thought I might be writing a collection of short stories.

Soon, I got another idea for a story about a woman with albinism who was a charlatan and had convinced people she had special powers. That story evolved into Suzette's part of the triptych, and it too got longer and longer as I revised it. Maple came last, and I started writing "Bottled Water" because I told myself I wanted to write about a mother and daughter who were besties, but after completing the opening scene, I had an epiphany: the mother was supposed to be dead.

Before I knew it, I had three parts to a book and no more short story ideas. And the characters in each part were speaking to each other across the sections, even though they never meet in person. This, coupled with their shared subjectivity as Black women with albinism, their complicated family structures/love lives, and their connection to my hometown made putting them together an easy decision. With that, *Nobody's Magic* was born.

Suzette, Maple, and Agnes's sections are written in three distinct voices. What were the choices you made for each woman's narration and why?

Suzette's family's wealth made me want to write her narrative in Northern Louisiana AAVE; her voice works as both a plot twist and as a way to create a character I could relate to. I know what it's like to grow up around adults like Suzette's parents, and to be tragically naïve about certain aspects of life, including oneself. I liked the idea of parsing out those things in a voice that sounded like one of my family members telling a story. I'm probably biased in this, but I think Southern Black women are some of the most intelligent people I know, and it felt fitting to make Suzette sound like the women that raised me, or like me when I'm home and I know my language is understood. I also love the irony of the fact that (in my opinion) Suzette is the most insightful of the three women, even though it's an insight she has to grow into. But the way she talks about what she knows just sounds like someone shooting the breeze. I wanted that.

Maple sounds like me when I talk to my friends, the way she code switches to get things done, and her sarcasm. It makes sense that the spaces she's moved through—college and hospitality jobs—would make that easy for her, so that was a choice that I fell into as I wrote that first conversation with her mom. In "Mind the Prompt," I wanted Agnes's narrator to sound like Agnes if Agnes were humble enough to tell her story. I wanted them to sound pompous and academic even when they're describing what's happening in Agnes's head. Honestly, the voice highlights one of Agnes's tragic flaws: her mistaken presumption that she's somehow remade herself into someone completely different from who she once was. I wanted her to sound intelligent while making disastrously stupid decisions, because eventually, she begins to realize how wrong she's been about so many things.

Were there characters that you understood and could write easily, and were there any characters that took longer to reveal themselves to you?

Suzette was the easiest to write, which is ironic because her character evolved the most between my initial conception and writing down her first words. Like I said, she was initially supposed to be a scammer, someone I wouldn't get along with in real life, but as she became herself, I liked her more and more, and by the time I got to the part when Doni starts to show interest, I loved them both so much it was unreal. I couldn't wait to spend time with them each day as I wrote.

Maple was also easy to write but writing her section down and then cutting it was difficult. Even so, I had a very clear sense of who she would be from the beginning, and that didn't change much during the process.



Agnes was the hardest to write because full disclosure, I hated her! But my hatred intrigued me; one of my favorite books is Toni Morrison's *Sula*, so I'm always down for a character who makes me cringe but makes me want to keep reading—or, in this case, keep writing. But when I got to what is now the halfway point in "Mind the Prompt," I just wanted to destroy her. In the original version, she got into the truck with the man she met at the gas station, and they disappear to parts unknown because that's what I thought she deserved. But when folks (including my editor) kept asking for more of her story, I realized that, at some point, she would find herself back in Shreveport with her mother and more important, with Berniece.

Who are some of your favorite writers and did they influence the way you wrote *Nobody's Magic*?

Even though the triptych aspect of *Nobody's Magic* came out of my longwindedness and friends who kept asking for more pages, I know I could not have envisioned it without having read Tayari Jones' debut novel, *Leaving Atlanta*, or Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Love, Anger Madness: A Haitian Triptych*. They are both powerful books written in three parts.

I'm also a longtime admirer of Charles Chesnutt, the early 20th century writer who, in my opinion, is the best transcriber of AAVE to date. There's an exquisite rhythm to the way the character Julius McAdoo tells stories, and I spent hours combing through Suzette's section, making sure the rhythm on the page matched the one Suzette would speak, just like Chesnutt. I love Toni Morrison's work, and watching *The Pieces I Am* shortly after I began writing this book gave me permission to write about home, to create a problematic character, and to write the book no one was looking for.

WELCOME TO LOUISIANA

***Nobody's Magic* takes place in Shreveport, Louisiana, your hometown. Why did you choose to set the story there? What are some of the specific places in the Ark-La-Tex region that inspired the setting of the book, and do you have a favorite place to recommend to readers?**

It's wild: the first time I met my agent, I told her I'd never write about Louisiana. At the time, I was much more interested in the spaces I was inhabiting: writers' conferences and retreats in various parts of the country. But when I started to tell Agnes's story, so much of what she was thinking about was home, the place that had shaped her but also scarred her, and perhaps it was the difficult work of leaning into that shared pain that made me reluctant to write about it at first. But I couldn't tell her story without talking about where she came from, and I certainly couldn't have put Suzette anywhere else. And when I realized that Maple's mother was dead and why, I had to make space to talk about gun violence in this place I love so much, and the proximity of that violence to the people I love. So really, it wasn't a creative decision as much as it was an emotive one.

I think the best part of writing this novel was getting to visit the places of my youth at a time when I couldn't get back home (and in some cases, even if I had gone, those places have completely changed). I loved writing about Agnes's high school, **Cross Lake**, and the parks and neighborhoods Suzette and Doni drive through on their dates. I also loved writing about the shopping areas, like **Pines Road, Line Avenue, Youree Drive**, and the **Industrial Loop**. Some of those places existed when I was a child, and others have come up in the years after. And I loved taking Suzette back to the **Cedar Grove/Eden Gardens South area**, where I grew up!

Local Tips from the Author:



- Get close to some trees and some water (Louisiana is called "Sportsman's Paradise" for a reason!)
- Get a carryout daiquiri from Thrifty Liquor with the tape across the lid
- Go to the Boardwalk or go eat on one of the boats
- Eat doughnuts from Southern Maid
- Eat fried chicken from Southern Classic
- Please eat fried oysters with the Brothers tartar sauce

**"No place does these things better.
I don't make the rules."**