

Book Club Kit



Behind the Book

Angela Flournoy on her novel *THE WILDERNESS*

I began thinking about *The Wilderness* in the early fall of 2016. At the time I felt two things keenly: 1. I was in my early thirties and I knew that the friendships I had with the women in my immediate circle were very important, and 2. I was interested in how our lives were progressing on paths so dissimilar to those of our parents. We weren't married yet, none of us had children, and the kinds of steady, well-paying jobs that had made our upbringings possible were increasingly scarce. As the final months of 2016 progressed, so did my uncertainty about the future.

Writing is how I turn over my own worry, as well as how I meditate on the sources of my own joy. I decided to write a novel about the past, the present and the near future of a group of friends. Through *The Wilderness*, I could consider the lives of contemporary Black women, and think about all of my other preoccupations, including how gender expectations, the shifting dynamics of city life, and the more alienating aspects of social media complicate their relationship to one another. In the time it took to write this novel I lost my mother, Francine. Then the pandemic struck, and I became a mother myself. Writing saw me through.

In *The Wilderness*, Desiree, Danielle, Nakia, January, and Monique enrich, color, and disrupt one another's lives, from 20-somethings to early 40-somethings, in a way I have seldom seen depicted in literature, but that I know from my own life, and from my mother's. Above all else, I hope to communicate that these lasting friendships—built out of continuous mutual choice, not blood, nor romantic love—deserve deep consideration.

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Discussion Guide

- 1) The passage of time is evident in *The Wilderness* as we follow these five women through their 20-year friendship. Most chapters are dated by the year; however, the story is not told in strict chronological order. How does this immersion in and estrangement from time orient or disorient you? How does it give you a fuller picture of womanhood?
- 2) On page 241 Flournoy writes “It might not take much for her to end up in the wilderness again.” What is the wilderness? Have you experienced it before or are you experiencing it now?
- 3) Part Three introduces a dramatic shift in the perspective of the novel: from the third-person to the first-person perspective where the narrator is no longer explicitly named, yet somehow, we still know who is speaking. What effect did this have on you?
- 4) On page 191, after Desiree buys a meal for an unhoused person, January tells her that she should have given him money instead. Have you ever experienced a conflict with a friend that unearthed your own moral code? Did you feel similarly set in your ways or were you more open-minded?
- 5) Danielle and Desiree have a strained relationship as sisters, and although they do not speak, they worry about each other and check-in on each other indirectly through their friends. What might explain this intensity of feeling but impossibility of saying?
- 6) Through the book, we see the characters encounter various uprisings in response to social conditions in their cities. How did uprisings during the pandemic or beyond affect the area where you lived? How did they affect your friendships?
- 7) Desiree laments Nakia leaving New York City for Los Angeles in order to pursue her dreams in the restaurant industry. How do we cope when friends we love move to faraway places? How do we support them even if it means being left behind?

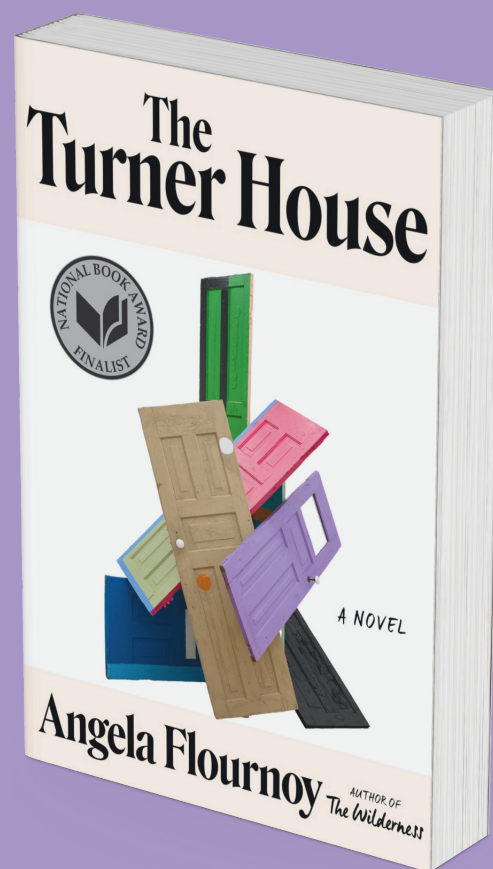
Discussion Guide

- 8) Over the course of their twenty-year friendship, the women watch each other age and change. Looking back on their younger years as women in their mid-lives enhances the memories they share and the feeling of closeness they experience, even many years later when they are in different locations. How do memories, time, and space interact with and change one another? How are these things connected for you?
- 9) The women engage in sexuality in various ways throughout the novel. How does sexuality liberate and, perhaps, limit them?
- 10) The rift between Desiree and Danielle is in part due to their respectively complex relationships with their grandfather, Nolan, and the fact that Desiree did not inform her sister that she was aiding in Nolan's wishes to end his own life. Death is a motif in the novel. What kinds of things—both physical and emotional—are left behind when a friend or family member, especially an elderly one, dies? How might the surviving relationships change? What duty do we owe to those who have passed, to those who are grieving, and to ourselves?
- 11) Monique's blog, *Black in the Stacks*, offers an exhilarating, first-person account of her career journey and reflections on her questions about the world. What is gained by processing the world through writing about it? Do you know of any real-life *Black in the Stacks* blogs or voices of today that offer a similar catharsis?
- 12) January's experiences with pregnancy and motherhood become central to her character's journey throughout the novel, and change the way she interacts with her friends. Has becoming a parent or caregiver shifted relationship dynamics in your life?

Also by Angela Flournoy

The Turners have lived on Yarrow Street for over fifty years. Their house has seen thirteen children grown and gone—and some returned; it has seen the arrival of grandchildren, the fall of Detroit's East Side, and the loss of a father. The house still stands despite abandoned lots, an embattled city, and the inevitable shift outward to the suburbs. But now, as ailing matriarch Viola finds herself forced to leave her home and move in with her eldest son, the family discovers that the house is worth just a tenth of its mortgage. The Turner children are called home to decide its fate and to reckon with how each of their pasts haunts—and shapes—their family's future.

Praised by Ayana Mathis as “utterly moving” and “un-putdownable,” *The Turner House* brings us a colorful, complicated brood full of love and pride, sacrifice and unlikely inheritances. It's a striking examination of the price we pay for our dreams and futures, and the ways in which our families bring us home.



NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

A New York Times Notable Book • An Amazon Top 100 Editors' Pick of the Year

Winner of the Paterson Fiction Prize and the Black Caucus of the ALA—1st Novelist Award

Nominated for the International Dublin Literary Award, the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work – Debut Author, and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Fiction

Finalist for the New York Public Library Young Lions Award, the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award, and the Indies Choice Award

Short-listed for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction, the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, the Ernest Gaines Award, The Morning News Tournament of Books, the Winter Lariat List, and the Medici Book Club Prize

Long-listed for the NBCC John Leonard Prize for A Debut Novel and the Chautauqua Prize