

Book Club Guide



Includes discussion questions, information about each of the authors, and helpful tips for organizing and running your teen book club!



About the Book

The paths of three teens, each adrift in their own struggle, intersect at the pizza parlor where they all work. Jessie is determined to be everything her parents don't want her to be; Cam is quick to laugh as he holds desperately to shards of hope in the wake of his cousin's disappearance; and Berlin grieves the end of a friendship while trying to keep her head above rising waves of a terrible numbness. Drawn close in the fight to save their beloved workplace and to speak out about the crisis that threatens their community, the trio discovers how much they need each other as the wonderful and terrible connections between their struggles come to light.

Questions to Get the Conversation Started

1. “[Y]ou could overwork the dough too—make it stiff, without tenderness” (pg. 92). Cam is talking about pizza dough, but he also says that it is a life lesson. Describe the life lesson in your own words. How does this lesson apply to Berlin? Cam? Jessie?
2. “For being Nehiyaw, for being a woman, once more because she was Black too. Three reasons for the RCMP to look the other way” (pg. 44). Explain what Cameron is saying here in your own words. How do anti-Native bigotry, misogyny, and anti-Blackness intersect with neglect on the part of the police?
3. Discuss the positive and negative ways that possibility is invoked by all the main characters. Berlin and her surrealists, Cam and his hope, and Jessie and her rebellion—how do you see possibility connecting with each of their desires for the future?
4. “When we can let the things that bring us together fall apart, become places without souls, it’s another way we learn not to care about each other. Or about the land. Capitalism eats and eats and never satiates its hunger. It eats without thought. And that’s not eating anymore. That’s consumption” (pg. 102). A lot is packed into this statement from Berlin—explain it in your own words. What’s your reaction to it? Describe a real-life example of the uncaring consumption that Berlin is defining here.
5. Discuss the manipulation and abuse of power by men (particularly white men) in the narrative. How do Jessie’s father, Mr. MacDonald, and Dustin Granville wield power and cause harm to others in similar ways? Consider why the violence they commit receives news coverage while the everyday violence endured by vulnerable community members does not.
6. Kiki’s perspective is the only one we get in the form of poetry, and it’s also the only one we don’t get firsthand. How do the interjections of Kiki’s poems impact your reading? How does Kiki’s narrative and its relation to the other characters and the novel as a whole connect to the ongoing human rights crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People?
7. In her author’s note, Jen Ferguson mentions the insidiousness of anti-Blackness and the ways that even otherwise critically conscious Berlin perpetuates anti-Blackness against Joe. What connections exist between anti-Indigenous bigotry and anti-Black racism? How does push-back against anti-Indigenous bigotry and colonizer perspectives still leave room for anti-Blackness?

About the Author

Jen Ferguson is Michif/Métis and white and has a PhD in English and creative writing. Her debut novel, *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, received great acclaim. She lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and teaches at Coe College. She always puts pineapple on her pizza. Visit her online at jenfergusonwrites.com.





About the Book

Young Léon Delafosse is never happier or more at ease than when he is unraveling melodies on a piano. Unfortunately, if he is going to live up to his title of “France’s Mozart” and afford to continue his musical studies, he needs a patron, and the mercurial socialites of Parisian high society require more than mere talent to accept someone of Léon’s humble origins. As Léon does his best to meet ever-heightening expectations, he must navigate false friends, malicious competitors, and the shock that the desires for other boys that he has always hidden may not be as wrong or as isolating as he thinks.

Questions to Get the Conversation Started

1. Marcel says to Léon, “That’s Marcel Proust in a nutshell, an asthmatic pretending to smoke” (p. 20). Describe what he means in your own words. As we learn more about Marcel and his choices during the novel, how does this assessment of himself hold up?
2. Consider the different letters that Léon receives from Marcel, Robert, and Félix. How do the differences in the letters correspond to the differences in Léon’s relationship with each of them?
3. Myth: the necessity of the closet for queer individuals declines with time.

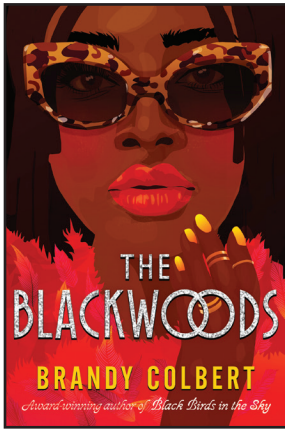
Reality: the closet adapts to prevailing norms.

What do you think of this statement? Describe what it’s saying in your own words. How does this statement relate to Léon, Marcel, and Robert over the course of the novel?
4. “Society is a little like playing the piano. You can try too hard (p. 80).” What does trying too hard look like? Where in the novel do you see Léon or another character trying too hard in their society ambitions?
5. The tension between using others and being used by them is a major theme in this novel. Discuss some examples that you see of each in the story. How do using and being used relate to power? In your discussion, consider the conversations that Léon has with John Singer Sargent about his position (and vulnerability) in Parisian high society.
6. Léon’s life after his tumultuous fall from grace is largely absent from the historical record. What do you think of the ending he is gifted in the novel? Is it a happy ending? Do you feel satisfied with it as a reader and are you supposed to be satisfied? Why or why not?
7. bell hooks describes queerness as “not being about who you’re having sex with—that can be a dimension of it—but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” How does this definition compare to Léon’s struggle with his identity and desires (sexual, social, and professional)? In what ways is he at odds with everything and trying to invent a place to thrive? Does he succeed?

About the Author

Eliot Schrefer is a *New York Times* bestselling author and has twice been a finalist for the National Book Award in Young People’s Literature. His other awards include a Printz Honor, a Stonewall Honor, and the Green Earth Book Award. He is also the author of *The Darkness Outside Us*, *Endangered, Threatened*, and *Queer Ducks (and Other Animals): The Natural World of Animal Sexuality*. He lives with his husband in New York City, is on the faculty of the Hamline University and Fairleigh Dickinson University MFA in creative writing programs, and reviews books for *USA Today*. Visit him online at eliotschrefer.com.





About the Book

You'd think that living a life of wealth and fame as the fourth generation of veritable Black Hollywood royalty would be all glitz and glamor, but it's anything but. As cousins Hollis and Ardith and the entire Blackwood family mourn the loss of their matriarch, the beautiful and talented Blossom Blackwood, their family's foundation begins to crack, releasing secrets that Blossom long kept hidden. Told across multiple time periods, Hollis, Ardith, and Blossom navigate uncertainty, loss, and distrust as they seek to find their respective paths. But how do you find yourself and discover who you could be when everyone—from strangers to those you hold most dear—is certain they already know who you are?

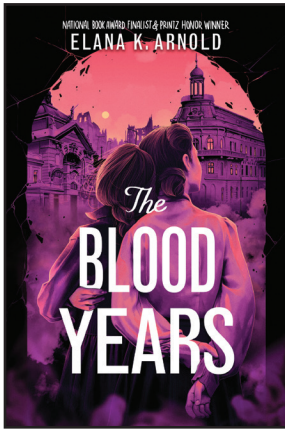
Questions to Get the Conversation Started

1. Discuss how foreshadowing and clues between the narrative's time jumps and perspective switches shape and subvert your expectations as a reader throughout the novel. Consider the hints you get about Grandpa Abe's father, Orlando's antagonism, and the ways that Blossom, Hollis, and Ardith's stories connect.
2. Discuss examples of characters' beauty being described in lustrous tones of brown. What does it mean for beauty on and off screen to be described distinctly in terms of Blackness in the story?
3. Hollis empathizes with Dwayne's struggle to tell his family he wants to quit basketball, saying it reminds her of how everyone "would ask her when she was going to go into the business, as if it were a foregone conclusion" (pg. 103). Discuss the pressures both Hollis and Dwayne face to enter their respective "family businesses." How do race and gender contribute to those pressures?
4. Discuss the role of privilege in the novel. How does privilege impact Blossom's career journey? Why does Hollis's attitude about her family's wealth frustrate Orlando so much? Where does privilege fall in the division between Black Hollywood and mainstream Hollywood?
5. What is the relationship between friendship and romance in the different characters' narratives and the novel as a whole? All the main characters experience shifts in their relationships with the young men in their lives—how do they each navigate these changes?
6. "That's not how grief works. You don't get a choice in how or when it comes. It just does" (pg. 94). Discuss what Matty is saying about grief and why. Where else in the novel do you see examples of grief showing up at unexpected times and in unexpected ways?
7. Spite is one of the most subtle yet powerful motivators in this novel. Find some examples of Blossom, Ardith, Hollis, and other characters using spite as a fuel to push back and push forward. Why do you think spite helps empower them in each case?
8. A wonderful thread of real-life Black creatives and performers (especially Black women) is woven throughout the entire narrative. Are you familiar with them all and their work? Choose one and take a deep dive into their works and career. What connections do you make between their legacy and their invocation in the novel?

About the Author

Brandy Colbert is the author of several acclaimed books, including *Black Birds in the Sky*, which was the winner of the 2022 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Nonfiction and a finalist for the American Library Association's Excellence in Young Adult Nonfiction Award. Her other books include the Stonewall Book Award winner *Little & Lion*, *Pointe*, *The Voting Booth*, and *The Only Black Girls in Town*. Brandy is a member of the faculty at Hamline University's MFA program in writing for children. You can find her at brandycolbert.com.





About the Book

Frederieke Teitler has always lived in the Romanian city of Czernowitz, surrounded by family, community, and general safety as a Jew. But as she navigates her beloved sister's mercurial whims, her father's absence, her mother's depression, and her grandfather's unshakeable faith, the city begins to change around them all. The ever-present shadow of antisemitism grows and darkens as World War II begins, steadily consuming every light in Rieke's world, and as first the Russians and then the Germans invade Czernowitz she must face an impossible question: Is a life stripped of everything that matters a life worth fighting so hard to keep?

Questions to Get the Conversation Started

1. Rieke's relationship with Astra is arguably the most fundamental to her sense of self. Describe this relationship, and how Rieke defines herself in terms of it, in Part I vs. Part V. How do Rieke and Astra change in relation to one another over the course of the novel?
2. Consider the paratextual material (the Czernowitz timeline, author's note, and reading list). What are your thoughts about Rieke's fictionalized account being bookended by this historical research? How does this information and your own knowledge (or knowledge gaps) about the political, military, and genocidal events in Romania and wider Europe during the Holocaust shape your reading and understanding of Rieke and other characters? What's the effect of juxtaposing details of historical context with Rieke's narrative, which is hallmarked by a lack of consistent information regarding what is happening to Jews in her city and across the continent?
3. "A person has to have morals. If not, what is a person?" (pg. 160) Describe what Opa is asking here. What answers does the novel provide to this question? How would you answer it?
4. The novel is told in chronological order and emphasizes Rieke's experience of time. By contrast, how would you describe her experience of space throughout the novel? Consider the narrative being set in a single city, whose most drastic of changes to its space(s) impact only its Jewish population. What are the spaces that Rieke occupies or identifies with in the novel's different parts? Opa says that time is cyclical; how is Rieke's shrinking and expanding experience of space a similar cycle? How does space change her and how does she change space over the course of the novel?
5. Discuss the role of power in the narrative. What does power look like? Who has it, who doesn't, and why? Is there more than one kind of power? How does Opa's insistence that "we can love more persistently than they can hate" (pg. 101) relate back to power?
6. Consider the role that bearing witness plays in your reading. If you're unfamiliar with the concept and its relationship to trauma, take a moment to look it up. In her author's note, Elana K. Arnold describes her novel as a mosaic of broken plates (pg. 291); how do bearing witness and your role as the novel's reader fit into this analogy? How does bearing witness to Rieke's story relate to Elana's invitation for you to "look back" and "look around" (pg. 294)?

About the Author

Elana K. Arnold is the bestselling and award-winning author of many books for children and teens, including the Printz Honor winner *Damsel*; the National Book Award finalist *What Girls Are Made Of*; and the Global Read Aloud selection *A Boy Called Bat*. She is a member of the faculty at Hamline University's MFA in writing for children and young adults program and lives with her family in Long Beach, California. You can find her online at elanakarnold.com.



Photo by Kristyn Strobe

Tips for Organizing a Book Club for Teens

- Give your book club a **memorable name** that will attract attention. The more humorous the better!
- **Market your book club** everywhere that you can. Design eye-catching graphics that illustrate your book club's brand, with a logo that's consistent so that it's easily identifiable. Use your graphics to make fliers and bookmarks to distribute during events and programs at local schools and public libraries. Create social media accounts with your book club's name and post content there as well.
- **Remind your audience of upcoming meetings.** Teens are busy and it can be easy to forget when meetings are planned. Share updates on social media before each meeting so that teens know when one is coming up.
- Think about how technology can **increase accessibility.** Offer a virtual option for those who may not be able to attend in person by setting up a device and allowing them to connect digitally. While many teens prefer reading physical books, selecting titles that have an eBook or Audiobook increases accessibility.
- **Choose books that teens will want to read,** and if you're not sure what those may be, ask for input from teens. Design a survey online asking questions about teen reading preferences and ask teachers to share it with their classes. Ask teens questions about what books they are reading and what upcoming titles they are excited about.
- If you have funds available, consider arranging **virtual author visits.** The opportunity to meet an author can create enthusiasm for your book club. Find more resources about author visits on <https://harperstacks.com/pages/author-visits> or email schoolandlibrary@harpercollins.com.

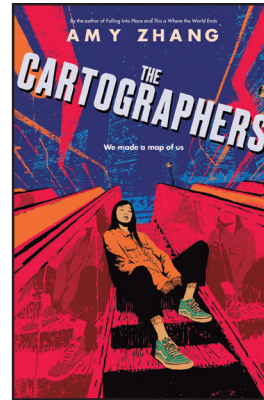
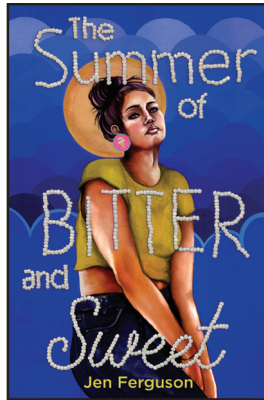
Tips prepared by Lisa Kellar, BA, MLIS, Youth and Adult Services Librarian and Teen Specialist at Kent Free Library in Kent, Ohio.
Guide by Anastasia Collins, MA, MLIS, librarian, youth literature scholar, anti-oppression educator. Follow her at @DarkLiterata.



Your next book club pick awaits!

If you loved:

Those Pink Mountain Nights and want more books where the setting is a character



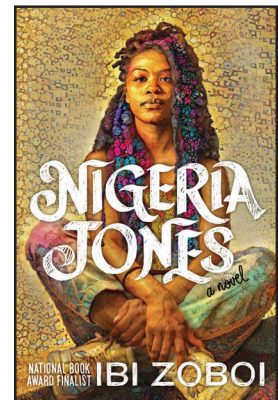
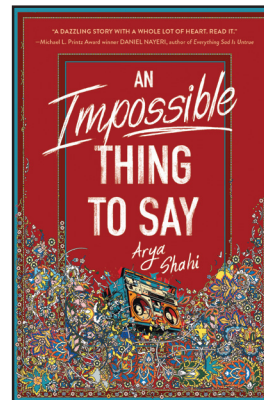
If you loved:

Charming Young Man and want more books where the main character is choosing between two worlds



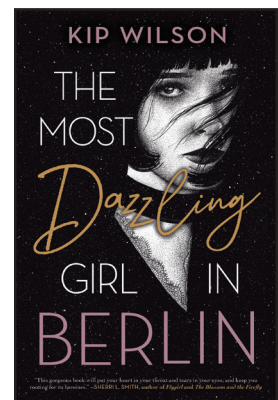
If you loved:

The Blackwoods and want more books exploring intergenerational family relationships



If you loved:

The Blood Years and want more books exploring the consequences of war



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