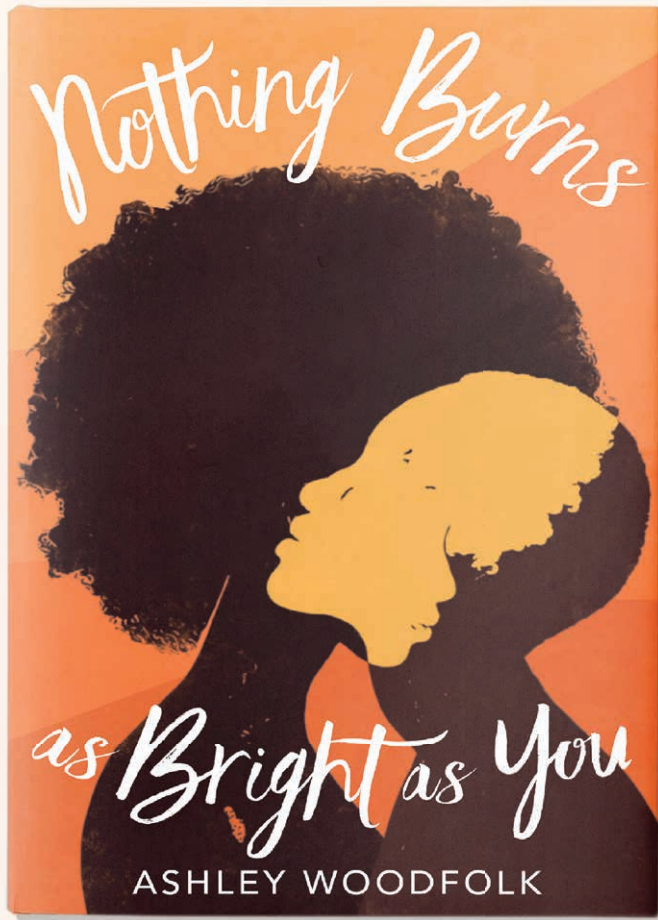


EDUCATORS' GUIDE

Nothing Burns as Bright as You



ASHLEY WOODFOLK



★ "The rich language describing the way the two love each other is magnificent. . . . A beautiful, emotionally charged novel."

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

★ "A masterfully crafted love letter to tumultuous, young, queer love and its lessons. Recommended for all libraries."

—School Library Journal (starred review)

★ "A tautly written, fast-moving novel in verse that captures the unbalanced experience of an all-consuming love."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

★ "Effective and deeply affecting . . . an uncommon exploration of girlhood and its messier relationships."

—Booklist (starred review)

About the Book

It all starts with a fire. The wild fire of two queer Black girls colliding into an intense friendship. The hungry fire of explosive, corrosive attraction for each other. The desperate fire of fights and frustration and fear that love is not enough. The raging fire they eventually set because nothing is as it should be—nothing around them and nothing between them.

There's nothing so incredible as being in love. And nothing quite as destructive.

About the Author

Ashley Woodfolk has loved reading and writing for as long as she can remember. She graduated from Rutgers University and worked in children's book publishing for over a decade. Now a full-time mom and writer, Ashley lives in a sunny Brooklyn apartment with her cute husband, her cuter dog, and the cutest baby in the world. Her books include *The Beauty That Remains*, *When You Were Everything*, and the *Flyy Girls* series. Find her on Twitter or Instagram @ashwrites.



A Letter From the Author

Dear Readers,

More often than not, when we talk about the people we love, we focus on the joy. The way the person can always make us laugh, or how we feel so at home with them. The way they can read our minds and anticipate our needs. When we love someone, they shine, like bright, flickering flames in our minds and memories.

While those things are wonderful, most relationships are more complicated than that. And sometimes those complications are made worse if each person has different expectations for what the relationship is or what it might become.

I'm thrilled to share with you my newest novel, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*. It tells the story of two emotional, reckless girls in a messy but loving relationship; how they complement each other but also how they clash. One day, they set a fire and things spiral out of control, and as one of the girls looks back on all the ways they've come together and have been pulled apart, the fate of their relationship is revealed.

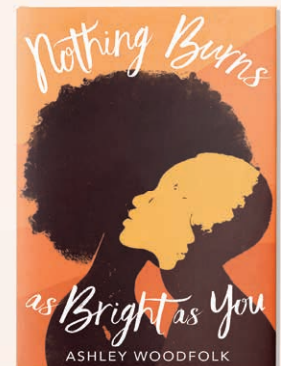
This is a story that is deeply personal to me, because it is an exploration of my latent queerness and some of my most intimate friendships. But also because this book brings to the forefront one of the hardest questions life can ask of us: Is love alone really enough to make a relationship work? It's a question I've bumped up against for years as I navigated complex friendships, romantic entanglements, and bitter breakups. Love is so tricky and different for every person and every relationship (especially when you're young and questioning everything about the world and about yourself). I needed to write a book that normalized not knowing what you're doing, messing things up, and trying again.

Nothing Burns as Bright as You is intense and gentle; sad and hopeful—the way life often is. I want readers to walk away from this novel being more open to the layers of love; being more willing to recognize the good and the bad. But I also want everyone who reads this book to know they're worthy of love regardless of the messes they've made or the pain they've endured. I want readers to know that the world wouldn't be the same without their flickering flame, and that working to love ourselves is just as important as learning to love others. Thank you for any time you spend with this story. It's an honor to do this work alongside you.

—Ashley Woodfolk

Discussion Questions

1. Think about some forms of poetry that you've encountered. In your own words, what makes a piece of writing poetry? How is reading a story in verse different than reading prose? How does the story being told in verse shape your understanding of the characters, their actions, and their relationship?
2. Writing in verse means an author manipulates not only word choice but also how the words appear on the page to express and shape meaning. Find some examples in the novel where the placement of text or the use of white space on the page reflects or undermines what the words of the poem(s)—the speakers' words—are saying. How does this manipulation of text impact your reading by adding tension, giving you a break, making a poem gentle or abrupt or intense, etc.?
3. What makes a relationship between two people good or bad? Do all good relationships last and bad ones end? How do love and destructiveness coexist in the main characters' relationship? What makes their relationship unsustainable?
4. In the first "A lie" poem, the narrator says that "when you're fucked up, there are more important things than attraction. / Like distraction. Like destruction" (p. 7). What does this mean? How are the main characters "fucked up?" Are they struggling because there's something wrong with them or with their circumstances? How do distraction and destruction help them cope?
5. Discuss the novel's second-person narration. What is the impact of the main characters being referred to only as "you" rather than by name? How do you, the reader, engage with the "you" in the story? What does second-person storytelling do that first or third person does not?
6. Nearly all of the novel is narrated by one of the main characters, except the first and last poems. What do you make of this? What is significant about one of the characters getting the most say in the story, and the other character getting the first and final word? What does it add to your understanding of their relationship, their intense affinity, and their insurmountable incompatibility?
7. In her author's note, Ashley Woodfolk talks about the vulnerability that is shared between girls and that can intensify the fallout of a friendship or romantic relationship that comes to an end (pp. 273-4). Do you agree with her that shared vulnerability magnifies the emotions, tensions, trauma, and compassion in a relationship? How are the main characters vulnerable with each other? How does vulnerability intensify the passion and instability of their relationship? Use the text to support your answers.
8. Fire has multiple, sometimes conflicting connotations (warmth, utility, injury, discovery, destruction). Discuss the theme of fire in the novel. How is it used—as a plot device and as a metaphor—to communicate emotion, conflict, foreshadowing, etc.? What does the complexity of fire bring to this story of such a passionate, unstable connection? Many of the poem titles reference "The Fire"—what fire do you think they mean?



Discussion Questions

9. Discuss the interludes of the "A lie" and "A truth" poems. What is their role in the story, given that we have only the main characters' perspectives on what is true? What's the significance of how these shorter poems are placed on the page? What do you make of the novel ending with "A lie?"
10. Think about the novel's timeline. It opens and closes at the end of the characters' relationship, and the bulk of the story is everything that came before. Many of the poems' titles are time-specific, though none of them are in chronological order. What is the significance of all this in a story about a relationship that is a ticking time bomb?
11. As the characters' relationship comes to a sudden end, the narrator says "I am not a poet. / But I have to write about us. / To prove that we were here" (p. 258). What do you think about the narrator, at the end of a novel told in verse, insisting that she is not a poet? Why invoke poetry as a way to prove the characters were here? What does writing about their love prove that their relationship together does not?
12. Right as her world is unraveling, the narrator comes to a powerful truth—"I am worth fighting for too" (p. 265). How and why does this truth make the end of the characters' relationship a certainty? What is the significance of this truth in world a world where queer Black girls like the main characters face erasure, bigotry, and violence?
13. Think about how our culture defines a "happy ending," particularly with stories about two people in love. Now think about the conclusion of this novel. Is it a happy ending—why or why not? How might you shift the definition of a happy ending to reconcile these characters' tumultuous time together and their inevitable separation?
14. In the author's note, Woodfolk mentions that "clarity about how ingrained bi-erasure is in our culture" (p. 273) helped her understand her own identity and put her past relationships into a different context. What is bi-erasure? Look it up if you're not sure and describe it in your own words. What role does bisexual, biromantic, and other queer representation in this novel play in pushing back against erasure?
15. Of all the poems in the novel, pick one that you think best captures the main characters' relationship, and explain why. Use the text to support your choice. Take a moment to read your poem aloud. What is its most significant line or image, and why? What is the line or image's relationship to the rest of the poem? What is your poem's relationship to the other poems in the novel?

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