Designed FOR EXPLORATION

PAIDEIA SUMMER READING GUIDE

LUThER COLLEGE
INTRODUCTION

By Kathy Reed, Paideia director

Welcome to your first reading assignment for Paideia 111–112: Enduring Questions. If you are a community member reading along with us, welcome to our community-wide discussion of Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*. The Paideia Program is excited to share the rich experience of reading and talking about this award-winning and deeply compelling novel. One Luther faculty member wrote, “It usually takes fifty to one hundred pages before a book draws me in, but, once in a while, a book hooks me in its first pages. *The Vanishing Half* captivated me in the first three sentences.” They continued, “The book literally woke me up in the middle of the night and pulled me out of bed so I could write down [the thoughts] it provoked.”

In fact, the story is so engrossing that you’ll need to remind yourself to stop and think about the questions it raises. **Paideia students, now is the time to start reading with a pencil in hand, so that you can mark places that strike you as important, interesting, or puzzling.** Or if you don’t like writing in your book, use sticky notes with a word or phrase to remind you of why you thought you’d want to come back to this spot for discussion in class or with friends and family.

As you read, keep in the back of your mind the Paideia 111–112 Enduring Question for the year: **In a divided society, how do we live in community?** In *The Vanishing Half*, the divided society is made vividly clear in the lives of two African American identical twin sisters, Desiree and Stella Vignes, who suffer an unspeakable childhood trauma together, grow up inseparable, and then become estranged as adults when Stella makes the decision to pass as white and vanish from her family and the culture in which she was raised. The realities of systemic racism are captured in the contrast between the lives of the two sisters. For example, when Desiree, who identifies as Black, searches for traces of the now “white” Stella, she goes back to the department store, appropriately called “Maison Blanche” (“White House”) where Stella had worked when they were last together. The Black man (named Early) who is helping Desiree advises her “You got to go in there like somebody they tell things to, somebody that gets what she wants.” Desiree responds, “Be white, you mean.” Early affirms, “Easier that way” (74).

Again and again, in the lives of Desiree and Stella and those of their daughters Jude (who has inherited the dark black skin of her father) and Kennedy (blond-haired, violet-eyed daughter of Stella and her white husband), we bear witness to overt and subtle divisions caused by racism at both the individual and structural level. Racism alone does not define them or their experiences, but it does profoundly affect the possibilities they have and the choices they make. We come to understand the
characters and the divisions between them through the lens not only of race, but also of gender identity, age, social class, educational status, and intrinsic personality traits (such as introvert/extrovert). Look for and take note of all of these kinds of divisions and the ways they are processed by the characters in the novel.

At the same time, the stories of these characters reveal not only the barriers to forming community across socially constructed divides, but they also show us the ways that relationships and social practices and institutions can and do break down those barriers. In one central example, we witness a tender and nonconventional relationship between Desiree’s daughter Jude and Reece, a white transgender man. Their developing friendship surrounded by a community of drag queens offers a model of acceptance and inclusion. What can you take away from the story about what is needed to form communities of trust across differences?

BACKGROUND

The novel spans a period from the 1940s through the 1980s, starting in the tiny rural town of Mallard, Louisiana. Mallard is an enclave of light-skinned African Americans who have set themselves apart from and “above” darker-skinned members of their race, an attitude known as colorism. While the town itself is fictional, Brit Bennett has explained that it was hearing her mother telling of such places in her childhood in Louisiana that gave her the idea for this book. Colorism plays a pivotal role in the twins’ history, while at the same time their community is united by the brutality of racism in Jim Crow–era Louisiana. For the twins, racist brutality causes the central trauma of their childhood—witnessing their father dragged from their home and lynched by white men.

Through the separate yet inextricably interwoven stories of the twins and their daughters, we travel from Mallard to New Orleans to Los Angeles to New York, and even briefly to Minneapolis. The narrative doesn’t follow a straight chronological path, but it will be clear when a shift in time and place has occurred. Jumping across time and place and shifting narrative point of view becomes a part of the way readers come to understand complex identities and how they are developed. In the stories of the daughters, we see young adults trying to figure out who they are and what their place in the world is, just as many of you will be doing in the formative years ahead of you.

As you read, learn all you can from each of these main characters: Stella and Desiree, Kennedy and Jude, and the important related characters Early and Reece. Mark the places where these characters do or say things that help us understand what makes them who they are. In addition to coming to understand and empathize with the characters, notice the way the story is told and choose four or five spots that you’d like to talk about with others. What passages jump out at you, and why? What questions do they leave you with?

The exciting news is that you will get to hear the author Brit Bennett answer some of these questions in an interview with Luther Paideia faculty and students. She will also give an address directly to the Luther College community in her virtual visit with us on September 1–2. As a preview, you might like to view this interview with Brit Bennett on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah.

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1 Thank you to members of a summer 2020 reading group, in particular Luther faculty members James Hoke and Jonathan Struve, for contributing ideas and questions.

2 Review by Lynell George, LA Times, August 12, 2020

3 “Jim Crow” refers to the laws enacted in the post–Civil War era to legalize racial segregation. Such laws were in force until the late 1960s, and many would argue that they exist in subtler forms to the present day.
STUDY QUESTIONS

For each Paideia text, we offer a set of study questions to consider as you read. Reading the study questions before you begin reading the book, and then taking some notes on each question as you go, will help you process the reading and prepare you for class discussions and writing assignments. Get in the habit of writing down page numbers and quotations that help answer each question.

PART 1: “THE LOST TWINS (1968)”

1. If two identical twins can live as two different races, what does this help us understand about the social—as opposed to the biological—construction of race? Look for places throughout the book that explore how race is socially constructed.

2. In chapter two we read the agonizing description of the lynching of the twins’ father, told from Desiree’s perspective. What specific phrases stand out to you, and why, as you reflect on this passage?

   You were supposed to be safe in Mallard—that strange, separate town—hidden amongst your own. But even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die. The Vignes twins were reminders of this, tiny girls in funeral dresses who grew up without a daddy because white men decided that it would be so (35).

PART 2: “MAPS (1978)”

3. As you read about Jude going off to college, think about the ways in which her experience may be similar to and different from your own. Make a list of Jude’s experiences, anxieties, obstacles, struggles, expectations, hopes, and fears, and then do the same for yourself. What do you notice?

4. What do you learn from Reece, and from the humanity of the relationship that develops between him and Jude? What factors contribute to the bonds they share?

PART 3: “HEARTLINES (1968)”

5. Why do you think Bennett chooses to go back in time here and jump directly to the scene where Stella learns that a Black family is planning to move into her upscale white L.A. subdivision? How do Stella and her neighbors react, and why? Find a passage that sums up their point of view.

6. What does it mean for Loretta Walker to be called “uppity”? In what other contexts do you notice this word being used throughout the book?

7. After the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Stella reflects:

   *Important men became martyrs, unimportant ones victims. The important men were given televised funerals, public days of mourning. Their deaths inspired the creation of art and the destruction of cities. But unimportant men were killed to make the point that they were unimportant—that they were not even men—and the world continued on (179).*

   How does this statement reflect Stella’s own past in the novel? And what does the quote say about justice—what it is, what it is not, and/or what it should be?

PART 4: “THE STAGE DOOR (1982)”

8. How and why does Jude become obsessed with finding Stella, seeing her “everywhere, always, and nowhere at the same time” (211)?

9. What are the complexities in Kennedy’s relationship with her mother? What is the irony of their argument over Kennedy dropping out of school to pursue acting? See Kennedy’s comment to Jude about why she doesn’t feel self-conscious being on stage: “Yes, but acting is different,” she said. “You only show people what you want to” (242).


10. What is resolved, and what remains unresolved, in this last section of the novel? What are you left wondering?

11. The four main characters are all related, yet at various points they struggle with whether or not they are one another’s family (for example, on page 239, Jude thinks of Kennedy, “They couldn’t be cousins.”). Are they family? Why or why not? How does Bennett complicate what and who constitutes one’s family?

12. Perhaps each of us has a half, or a part of us, that we try to make vanish. Reflect on what that is for you, and why, and how it affects you (you won’t need to share the answer to this question).