



Penguin
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SECONDARY EDUCATION

Kin

A Novel

Written by TAYARI JONES

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Teacher's Guide written by Dr. Kimberly N. Parker

SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

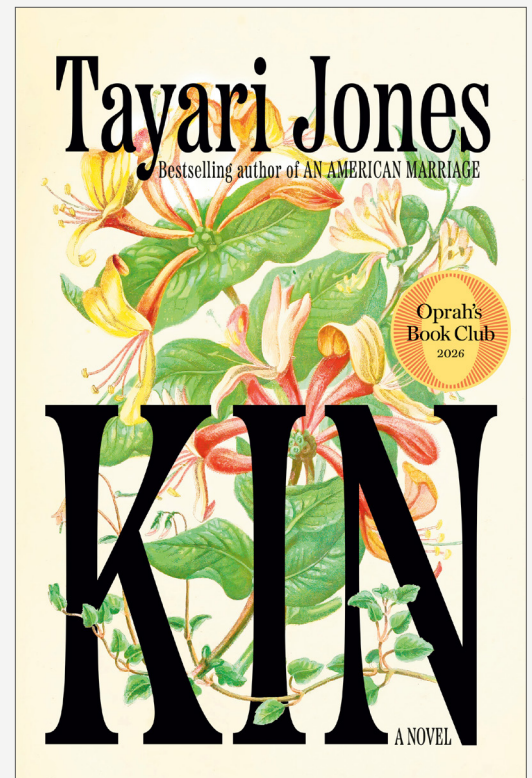
Vernice and Annie, two motherless daughters raised in Honeysuckle, Louisiana, have been best friends and neighbors since earliest childhood but are fated to live starkly different lives. Raised by a fierce aunt determined to give her a stable home in the wake of her mother's death, Vernice leaves Honeysuckle at eighteen for Spelman College, where she joins a sisterhood of powerfully connected Black women and discovers a world of affluence, manners, aspiration, and inequality. Annie, abandoned by her mother as a child and fixated on the idea of finding her and filling the bottomless hole left by her absence, sets off on a journey that will take her into a world of peril and adversity, as well as love and adventure, culminating in a battle for her life.

A novel about mothers and daughters, friendship and sisterhood, and the complexities of being a woman in the American South, *Kin* is an exuberant, emotionally rich, unforgettable work from one of the brightest and most irresistible voices in contemporary fiction.

Teacher's Guide

Includes:

**NOTE TO TEACHERS, PRE-READING
ACTIVITIES, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
BY THEME, EXTENSION ACTIVITIES
AND TOPICS, and RESOURCES**



NOTE TO TEACHERS

Kin is a complex novel and covers sensitive topics including domestic violence and abortion access and reproductive justice. Students are able to discuss these topics when guided with thoughtfulness and care. Teachers can prepare to have robust discussions with students about the issues the text raises through regular practices like low-stakes daily writing that helps them prepare for structured discussions and process their thinking.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Read the epigraph by Gwendolyn Brooks that starts the novel. What is Brooks suggesting about the relationship between women? What is interesting about the words “magnitude” and “bond”? What tone does this poem establish?
- Encourage students to keep a writer’s notebook as they read. This notebook is a place for pre-writing and ongoing processing to explore themes and prepare for discussions. It is also a place to collect words and phrases that Jones uses for craft studies of effective writing.
- Find an interview of Tayari Jones discussing the importance she places on letter writing and pen pals as a way for grounding students in the importance of writing as communication and how it enables the main characters to maintain their connections to each other.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
BY THEME****FRIENDSHIP**

1. Annie and Vernice are “cradle friends.” What is distinct about this designation and how does it establish the significance of their relationship? Why is this bond the most important of all the other friendships the two main characters have?
2. Ultimately, does either Vernice or Annie get what they want most? Explain. What is the price each pays for this desire?
3. What is important about the Spelman sisterhood? How do women demonstrate their commitment to each other, and what is the importance of this commitment?
4. Evaluate Vernice’s words: “Annie and I were two motherless girls who grew into motherless women. Who would we be to each other if Annie and Hattie Lee connected?” (p. 211). Does Vernice want Annie to find her mother?
5. How does letter writing help keep the two young women connected throughout their life transitions?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS

1. What is the difference between Vernice and Annie's post-secondary plans? How does each young woman's goals reflect social class constraints?
2. Miss Jemison says to Vernice: "Spelman is an opportunity for you. For Joette, college was an inevitability" (p. 108). What does she mean?
3. Explore the class tensions as presented by Joette and Marylinda. What social strata do they occupy in Atlanta, and how does each character accept and challenge their social class standing?
4. How does Vernice navigate social class dynamics at Spelman? What parts of her change as she acclimates to her life there, and what parts of her do not? What does she come to understand about herself and her desires and needs?
5. Explain the ways that Vernice's status changes based on her proximity to people she meets in Atlanta. Does she have any agency over the changes? Does she enjoy the direction her life moves in once she starts her Spelman life?
6. Marylinda is able to pass for white, described as "so pale, she was nearly see-through" (p. 118), where her father is known for "passing backward" (p. 177). Discuss the ways race functions in Atlanta and other places, and how characters navigate the complexities. What is different for characters based on their proximity to whiteness?

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT/MODERN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

1. Annie, Clyde, Bobo, and Babydoll have to rely on the *Green Book* to reach Memphis. What risks were they facing and what does their persistence indicate about them and their ambitions to reach their destination? What does their determination also suggest about the ways that Black collectivism enabled safety for Black travelers?
2. When Vernice is kicked off the bus for sitting in the white section of the bus, what does her reaction tell us about her understanding of the world at that moment? In your own words, describe the racial and political climate that Vernice's Spelman life is situated within.
3. What is a "Movement girl"? Track the ways Black people in the novel were politically active and the goals of that activism. Why does Vernice struggle to participate in this work, and what can be inferred about her hesitance, especially as related to her aspirations?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

MOTHERHOOD

1. Discuss the meaning of the moment when Vernice finally talks and says the word “Mother.” How does this utterance shape all that follows for the two girls?
2. Consider the ways women in the novel are connected to their mothers. Do you agree with Vernice’s words: “No matter who your mama is, or how long she’s been gone, you can’t help but miss her. When you are born, she marks you with her milk, even if you never tasted her breast. That’s not hoodoo, it’s just the way the body and the spirit come together to make you a person” (p. 7). How has each character been marked?
3. What are the factors that drive Annie’s search to find her mother both stated and subconscious? Should she give up her search? Who would Annie be without her pursuit of her mother?
4. Give your opinion about what kind of mother Aunt Irene is. How does she prepare Vernice for coping with her mother’s death and living in the world?
5. What bonds Annie and Vernice to each other beyond them being motherless girls? What keeps them together throughout the novel?
6. Why does Mrs. McHenry take such interest in Vernice? Why does Vernice respond as she does to Mrs. McHenry?
7. Vernice remarks: “If you have ever experienced motherlove, you can never forget the fragrance of it” (p. 8). Trace how characters embody this truth.

VIOLENCE AND BLACK WOMEN

1. What does the presence of violence against Black women throughout the novel indicate about the precarity of Black women’s lives? Who offers protection and who doesn’t? Which of these sources is surprising? Why?
2. Discuss the impact on Vernice when Mrs. McHenry reassures her about her son, Franklin: “But I can promise you this: my son will not kill you” (p. 158).

INDEPENDENCE

1. How does Aunt Irene navigate her freedom? What does she gain, lose, and regain by leaving Honeysuckle, returning to raise Vernice, and leaving again once Vernice goes to college?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

2. Hattie Lee and Aunt Irene wanted their independence. What was each woman attempting to escape and what do their aspirations suggest about the possibilities and limitations Black women had at that time?
3. Lulabelle tells Annie to keep money for herself, and Miss McHenry tells Vernice “when you get married, make sure there is a place in the house that belongs to you” (p. 153). What protections are being issued and why are they needed? What does this suggest about gender and independence?

FAMILY

1. Families who are not blood relatives provide love and support for Annie and Vernice. How do these characters create bonds that resemble a family? Consider the characters of Ms. Ola Mae, Ms. Jemison, and Mr. Daniel in your answer.
2. What is the importance of Annie naming Lulabelle and Babydoll as her next of kin? What does this act suggest about her feelings of belonging and family?
3. Mr. Daniel asks Annie if she wants to go to Memphis to rescue her mother. Is Hattie Lee in need of rescue? Is Annie? What do each of these characters truly need?

FOILS

1. Are any of the following pairs of characters foils? Annie and Vernice; Annie and Babydoll; Vernice and Joette. What qualities do they highlight in each other, and what is the impact on each character's development?
2. Compare and contrast the role of friendship between other characters in the novel: Ola Mae and Ms. Jemison; Aunt Irene and Arletha; Annie and Babydoll, for example. How do these different types of friendship illuminate the one between Vernice and Annie?

LOVE AND DESIRE

1. How do characters show love? Which characters have their love accepted and which ones don't? How do they find acceptance—if they do—anyway?
2. Annie and Vernice have people who offer them different levels of love and support. How might these ways that people demonstrate their affection—or withhold it—impact how the young women viewed themselves as loveable and capable of giving love?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

3. Does Annie have to die for Vernice to finally love Franklin?
4. What is the role affection plays? Why is it so hard for characters to give affection to each other, and how does this struggle complicate their growth?
5. Who is able to pursue their desires and who is not? Why? Also, what is the significance of the places in which characters are able to express their desire, and the places where they cannot.

Analyze the appeal of marriage for some characters in the novel and the rejection of it by other characters. What is gained and lost when characters marry or are unable to marry?

GRIEF

1. Hattie Lee returns to Honeysuckle when Annie is 16 but doesn't visit her daughter. How does this moment shape Annie?
2. Annie and Vernice visit Hattie Lee's residence on Palm Sunday, where they meet Annie Kay, "a well-loved child" (p. 250) with the same name. How must Annie feel with this information, knowing her mother has been so close? Why does Annie say to her sister, "Tell her that she don't have to worry about me coming back" (p. 251)? Explore the depth of emotions Annie felt as you evaluate the importance of this moment.
3. Why does Annie keep the secret of Hattie Lee visiting her at the Elektra to herself?

BLACK FEMINISM/GENDER

1. Analyze Lulabelle. How does she defy "traditional" notions of Black femininity and how is she free? What does Annie come to admire about her?
2. Consider the men in the novel. What are some of their similarities and differences? What do these characters suggest about Black masculinity, especially as related to the development of the female characters?
3. How does the lack of reproductive justice, especially to abortion access, impact Black women?

QUEERNESS

1. What are the queer characters in the novel able to do because they are queer? What limits are imposed on them because of their queerness?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

2. Compare Joette's acceptance of her queerness and Vernice's hesitance and eventual rejection of Joette.
3. Author Sayida Hartman writes: "Waywardness is a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed. It obeys no rules and abides no authorities. It is unrepentant . . . It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive." Is Joette wayward? How is she liberated and constrained, especially when it comes to her love of Vernice and other women?
4. Does Joette get to be happy? Does her act of helping Vernice at the end of the novel resolve her character arc? What does her willingness to help Vernice suggest about her feelings for Vernice, and why does she insist that Vernice tell Franklin the truth about their relationship? What does Joette gain from Vernice finally telling the truth? What does Vernice gain?
5. Why doesn't Vernice tell Annie about Joette, and how does Annie react when she finally learns about the relationship? Is anything unexpected about Annie's reaction? What does Annie seem to understand that Vernice cannot?
6. Define Joette's version of dignity, then explain her insistence on it for Vernice.

EDUCATION/LITERACY

1. Consider Lulabelle's reading of the bible, Annie's grandmother maintaining the family genealogy in the back of her Bible, and letter writing. In what ways does literacy function as a practice throughout the novel? What do these practices clarify about the importance of literacy to Black people?
2. Vernice's community helps her reach Spelman and succeed there. What does this collective effort portray about the importance placed on attending an HBCU (Historically Black College and University)? Describe Spelman College and its initial impact on Vernice. Why is this place such an important one for Black women? What values are upheld and how does Vernice help the reader understand those values?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES AND TOPICS

1. Compare Aunt Irene to *Sula* in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and how each woman attempted to create her own liberation.
2. Explore Black institutions that were integral for collective responsibility and sustainability, including Black newspapers, locations (i.e., Fox Theatre), and other institutions. Which ones still remain in the present, and what is lost when these institutions no longer exist?
3. Craft lessons: select one of the many lines of description Jones uses that resonate with you. Then, study the sentence, noticing Jones' word choice, description, use of humor, etc. Try writing some of your own descriptions using Jones' as a mentor text.
4. Read the article, "The Revolutionary Practice of Black Feminisms" (prhlink.com/blackfeminisms). Where do you see examples of this in the novel? Then, browse the National Museum of African American History's collection and create a response that synthesizes the Museum's exhibits and themes in the novel.
5. What was the state of health care and reproductive justice for Black women in the 1950s–1970s, especially as related to birth control and abortion access? Read selections from Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, then craft an argument that helps contextualize Annie's situation in the novel.
6. Read Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "the mother" and analyze its relevance to themes in the novel, especially reproductive justice.
7. Watch the documentary *Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of Black Colleges & Universities*. Create a multimedia response that makes an argument for the importance of these institutions to Black people historically and currently.

PAIRED TEXTS

- Britt Bennett, *The Vanishing Half*
- The Combahee River Collective Statement
- Naima Coster, *Take What You Can*
- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*
- Bell Hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*
- Honoreé Fanonne Jeffers, *The Love Song of W.E.B. DuBois*

PAIRED TEXTS

- Nella Larsen, *Passing*
- Skylar Mitchell, "I Found A College Where I Came First," *New York Times*, May 19, 2026. prhlink.com/collegesdei
- Toni Morrison, *Sula*.
- Stanley Nelson and Marco Williams, *Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of Black Colleges and Universities*. prhlink.com/wearerising
- Imani Perry, *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason-Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation*
- Chandler Walker, "Where the Crown Meets the Blazer." *Black Girls in Archives*, April 23, 2026. prhlink.com/crownmeetsblazer
- Stephanie Wambugu, *Lonely Crowds*

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

Dr. Kimberly N. Parker is an award-winning educator, co-founder of #DisruptTexts, and author of *Literacy is Liberation: Working Towards Justice Through Culturally Relevant Teaching* (ASCD, 2022). She is currently the director of the Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard.



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