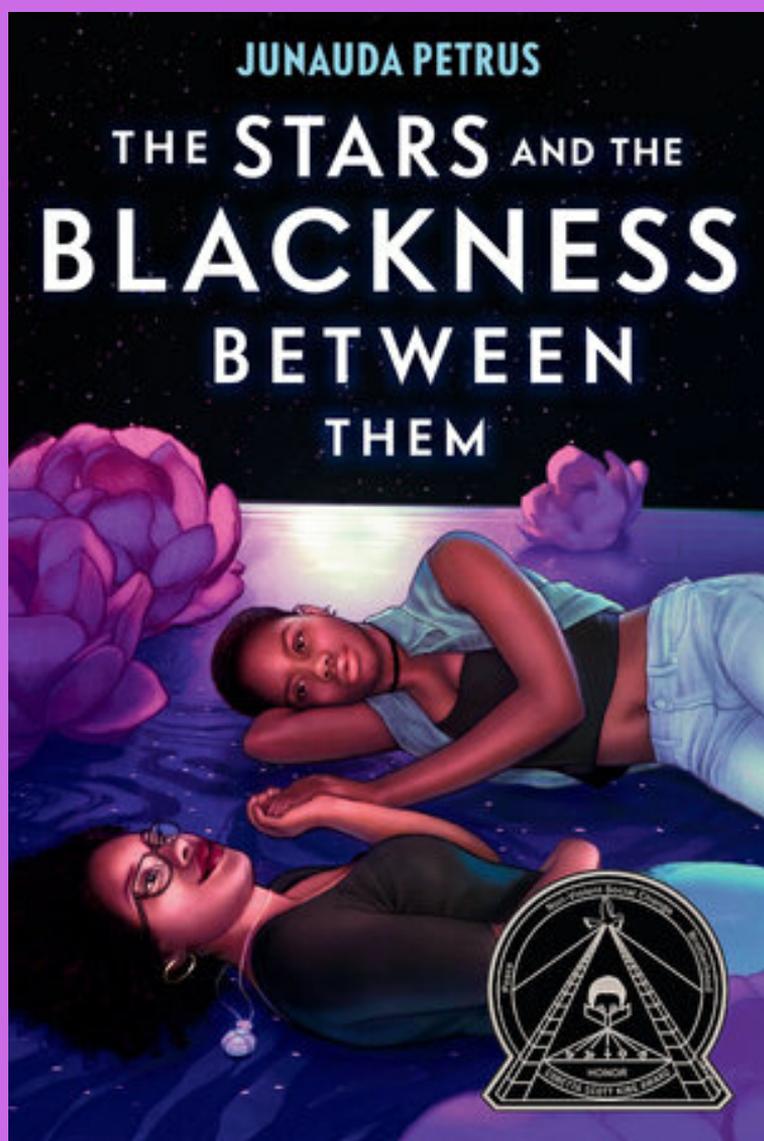


A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **“I head to Black Eden. His garden oasis is an empty lot next door that he transformed when we first moved to this house when I was five.” (Page 51)** Black Eden is Mabel’s family’s garden and her father’s tender obsession. How is Black Eden a portal and a space of healing for the characters? How is this theme of finding healing and love in nature reflected elsewhere in the novel? Is it significant that a Black man who loves sneakers and old-school hip-hop is also a passionate gardener? What do you make of the scene where Mabel and her friend pretend to be enslaved (page 94)?
2. When we meet Mabel, she is reflecting on her blossoming understanding of her own queerness as well as the relationship of Whitney Houston and Robyn Crawford (page 11). Whitney later reappears in Afua’s memoir (page 174) and again in Queenie’s memory of a party in New York in the 1980s (page 209). Discuss Whitney’s importance to Mabel and the story. How does Whitney play a similar role as a guide in Mabel’s life? Is it similar to Afua’s?
3. **“Queenie is pure light and sweetness and obsidian skin. She smell like spicy earth things, like sandalwood and cinnamon and dirt itself. She is strong and warrior, moving through the trees like a river, carving her way through mud, elegant, dark and slow like the molasses she say we should invoke for this journey.” (Page 3)** Audre introduces her grandmother to us as a powerful older woman, comparing her to a river slowly wearing away the earth. Over the course of the book we see Queenie at different points in her long life. Mabel knows her as the wise, loving, and mystical woman we meet on the first page of chapter one. Discuss ways that other episodes from Queenie’s life in the book add layers to her character, as a grandmother, a mother, and as a young woman.
4. **“‘Right, they, not she. My bad.’ He looked at me in the rearview mirror, but I don’t think he noticed me rolling my eyes. ‘They used to call ’em butch or stud back in the day. I wasn’t trying to be mean. I ain’t know.’” (Page 18)** We read that Mabel and her dad have always been close, but since she has become a teenager their relationship has grown a bit awkward, especially around gender and sexuality. What are the ways that Mabel and Audre navigate these topics with the various adults in their lives? How do the adults respond? Have you ever experienced a difference of understanding with a family member from a different generation on a topic of identity? How was it handled? Is there another way you wish it went or did it go in a way that was positive to you?
5. **“Remember that you are from the stars and that you can return to them. / Remember you are a sacred being of love, no matter the darkness of an earthly life. / Remember you come from light and return to freedom.” (Page 163)** The title of the book and memoir within this book speak to two major themes of the novel: Blackness and the cosmos. What ways do you see these themes interwoven within the book? What do these themes mean for you in your life and your experience? What ways do the multiple meanings of Blackness come into this book as well as the idea of stars and cosmos?

6. **“Audre, can I ask you a weird question?” I say to her, and she perks up and looks at me. And I look at her for a while and it’s kind of awkward. ‘I would like to kiss you one day if you’re into it.’” (Page 278)** Mabel and Audre start off as awkward friends and soon develop an intense relationship that includes healing and caretaking aspects as well as romantic ones. What were some healthy ways they navigated their boundaries and supported one another as they faced their various challenges? How were the themes of sensuality, sexuality and consent explored by the various characters in the book?
7. **“On death row, in some ways, I feel like I *did* become the astronaut of my childhood aspirations.” (Page 158)** Afua has been incarcerated for most of his life, since he was just a few years older than Mabel and Audre. He represents one of millions of people who live their lives behind bars in the United States of America, a population that is disproportionately Black. Is it surprising that Afua sees himself as an astronaut? What does he mean by this? What are your thoughts about incarceration in the US? What ways has it or has it not touched your life?
8. **“I like watching you eat. You eat like you know hunger for real. Me too. I love to eat. Food is a good healer. Make you feel like you have love.” (Page 196)** The novel explores the significance of food in various culinary traditions, from Trinidadian to Black American to Ital, as well as what’s grown in Black Eden and Queenie’s garden. Food provides not only sustenance but is a means of travel and a source of pleasure and healing for many characters. What were some of the foods you were introduced to or reminded of by the novel? What are some of the foods that are sacred to you or your family? Do you grow it or cook it? How do you enjoy food?
9. The book begins with a prologue in the form of a poem, one of many in the book. How did this book include poetry and poetic language within the telling of the story? How does poetry impact the telling and experiencing of the story? What do you think the prologue poem is about?
10. **“One thing I learned in the book my mom got me is that, by the time you see a star’s light shining bright, it could be dead already. Its brightness is a remnant of ancient creation. The star is the bright pinprick of heaven shining through darkness, an imploding message sent from a burning ancestor. Its illumination offers an arrangement of meaning from the sky. Sometimes, I think that is what astrology is: wisdom from our ancestors, the stars.” (Page 159)** Astrology plays many roles in the story. Afua finds astrology after he is incarcerated, and in turn he introduces Mabel to the practice after her diagnosis. And the book contains a poem for each of the twelve signs in the Zodiac. What does astrology mean to you? Does it resonate for you the way it does for characters like Mabel and Afua?