

Reading Group Guide for

The Black Kids

By Christina Hammonds Reed

About the Book

Seventeen-year-old Ashley Bennett is rich, popular, pretty, and Black. As her senior year of high school winds down, Ashley has been spending lazy days at the beach, and soaking poolside with her besties Courtney, Heather and Kimberly. That is until the officers accused of beating Rodney King are acquitted and the 1992 race riots break out. Torn between her idyllic LA life and the throes of racial unrest, Ashley is faced with questions about what it means to be Black, to be a good person, to be a friend, and, ultimately, to speak up in the name of life's injustices. The reality of the times hits closer to home when her older sister, Jo, finds herself in trouble as a result of her activism; a Black star athlete at her school is suspended after Ashley inadvertently starts a rumor about him looting; and her family's generations-old store is looted. With racial tensions escalating at school and in the city, Ashley reckons not only with her own identity, but also with how she has accepted and enabled her friends' micro and macroaggressions. What happens when wealth and status can no longer protect you? This is what Ashley must grapple with, and the realizations she makes are life changing.

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the book, Ashley realizes there is a lot about her family history that she either doesn't know or doesn't understand, or that no one talks about. As the story unfolds, however, she finds that speaking about things such as Grandma Opal's death, the family store, and Jo's mental health are essential for reconciling and moving forward as a family. In what ways do you think secrecy and avoidance shape Ashley's view of herself as a daughter, sister, and friend? How might things have turned out differently if everyone had been more forthright? Do you feel there is ever a time when it's better not to reveal family histories? Explain your answers.
2. A former Brownie, Ashley recalls singing this line from a camp song: "Make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver, the other is gold." Based on Ashley's relationships with Kimberly and Courtney, and later on with Lana and LaShawn, do you agree or disagree with this line from the song? Explain your answer using examples from the book or your own life.
3. For Ashley, her family's wealth and status afford her the luxury of living in an upper-middle class neighborhood and attending an elite private school with a majority of white students. Throughout her life so far, these were commonalities that solidified her relationship with Courtney and Kimberly. Conversely, these privileges distanced Ashley from the other Black kids at her school, many of whom commuted and received scholarships. To what extent do you feel we inherently pick friends based on social and economic commonalities? How do race and culture factor in? What are the benefits and drawbacks to each?
4. Ashley often feels that she finds favor with her mother because she is an "easier" child to raise than her sister Jo, not necessarily because she is seen or valued as an individual. In what ways do you feel that this dynamic influences Ashley's decisions throughout the book? How might reconciliation between

Jo and their mother influence Ashley's identity, as well as her relationships with both her mother and with Jo?

5. In addition to racism, *The Black Kids* also highlights colorism within the Black community. Ashley describes her cousin Morgan as "light-skinned, with long curls like Jo's," saying that even as a child Morgan understood that these features afforded her privilege and proximity to whiteness that her cousin did not have. Why do you think Morgan relied so heavily on anti-Black taunts in their childhood? Do you feel that those sentiments changed at all for her during the riots? Explain your answers.

6. Based on your initial impression of LaShawn and what you learn about him over the course of the book, do you find that your opinion of him changed in any way? If so, how? If Ashley had never started the rumor about LaShawn looting his shoes, do you think he still would have eventually become a friend or romantic interest?

7. Throughout the book, Ashley speaks often of feeling that her Blackness is distinct from others', creating an "us vs. them" mentality. This notion is challenged, however, as she encounters new friends whose Blackness doesn't fit into her simple dichotomy. Discuss how characters such as Lana, LaShawn, and Candace broaden Ashley's thinking about how Blackness can be experienced and defined. Provide textual evidence to support your responses.

8. Though a subtle theme, hair plays a critical role in Ashley's ability to ultimately find peace in her Blackness. This is revealed in instances such as her childhood with Morgan, in memories of getting her hair braided with Lucia, and finally in allowing Candace to braid her hair with beads. How do these personal hair experiences affect Ashley? Ashley notes that her mother thinks hair beads look "tacky," but she still chooses to have them in her hair. How does this small action show growth in Ashley, if at all?

9. Ashley reflects often on what it means to be a good person and to make mistakes. Explain the importance of this self-reflection and how it shapes the decisions that she makes. Do you engage in self-reflection around your character and decisions? What does that look like in your life?

10. "If white kids can run around wearing their bodies like they're invincible, what do the rest of us do? Those of us who are breakable?" In what ways do Ashley's white friends' actions compare to her own? How about the other Black kids? What does it mean in this quote to be "breakable"?

11. In the book, we come to understand that Ashley's white friend Kimberly doesn't consider her "blackity black." This idea of being palatable to her white peers, or less stereotypically Black, is something that Ashley discusses often in narration, particularly as she dives into Jo's old music collection. How do you think Ashley feels when Kimberly calls her out for listening to Funkadelic? If you were in her shoes, what would you have said to Kimberly? Do you believe there are certain criteria that must be met—beyond skin color—in order to be considered Black?

12. As Ashley comes to know and understand more about her surroundings during the riots and reveals to Lana that she started the rumor about LaShawn, she finally decides to make things right with him. What do you think of her timing? How would you have responded if you were LaShawn?

13. "Sometimes it's hard being a girl, and it's hard being black. Being both is like carrying a double load, but you're not supposed to complain about it." Here, Ashley explores the intersecting identity of

belonging to both a race and a gender that have been systemically marginalized. How does the idea of being a Black girl, as explained in the above quote, manifest in the lives of Ashley, Jo, Morgan, and others? How do these characters differ from one another in how they live out Black girlhood and its many challenges?

14. How does *The Black Kids* encourage readers to engage in difficult conversations surrounding racism-created traumas and how they happen in friendships, families, and other relationships? Do any instances of these traumas, such as Ashley's history of being called the "N" word or LaShawn being accused of looting his shoes, resonate with you? Explain your answer. If not, what did you take away from this book about the ways that overt and covert racism affect people of color broadly, and Black people specifically?

15. Why do you think the author decided to write out a separate section for Ashley's encounters with the "N" word? What is the impact and effect of this section's format, where readers see an abbreviated list as opposed to a narrative approach?

16. Though they are sisters, Ashley often mentions that she feels distant from Jo and the way that she has chosen to live her life. This is amplified by Jo's struggle with her mental health. Using textual evidence, compare the sisters' actions and reactions to the harsh events of the LA riots. Do you find that the sisters are, in fact, as different as Ashley believes, or do you think there are more similarities between them than she thinks? Discuss what might have had to happen for the two to have found more comfort and support in each other throughout the time frame of the novel.

17. Though they live in a predominantly white neighborhood, Ashley's parents emphasize the importance of meaningful and positive Black representation in their lives. Ashley speaks fondly of visiting Leimert Park to buy an ankara, and visiting Black Santa during the winter holidays. In your opinion, to what extent should parents shape and tailor their children's understanding of Blackness? When, if ever, does that tailoring become harmful?

18. In what ways have present-day riots and movements such as #BlackLivesMatter affirmed the humanity of Black people in the eyes of others? How do contemporary movements compare to the LA riots as presented in *The Black Kids*? Do you think that social media makes a difference in seeking justice and fighting racism? Explain your answers.

19. *The Black Kids* takes place during Ashley's senior year, a time when young people are stepping out of adolescence and into adulthood. In what ways, if any, do you think that graduating from high school in 1992 in LA shaped real-life students' outlook on the world after graduation? If possible, provide evidence from the text to support your conclusions.

20. If dates were never mentioned, would you know that *The Black Kids* was a historical fiction novel? Explain your answer. If so, what does this say about our progress as a nation?

Extension Activities

1. Early in the story, Ashley's mom is unwilling to intervene on behalf of the Black boys who had an encounter with the police. However, when it is her own daughter facing false accusations and undeserved charges, she goes above and beyond with her personal connections to help her. Consider your own identity, privileges, and resources. Write them down on an index card and role-play the scene

outside the convenience store with your class. Take note of the differences in how you and your peers reimagine the situation based on your personal identities and histories.

2. Shortly after the videotaped beating of Rodney King, fifteen-year-old Black girl Latasha Harlins was murdered by a Korean convenience store owner after being wrongly accused of stealing orange juice. Though this event added kindling to the eventual LA Riots, ultimately it was the acquittal of the police who beat Rodney King that is recognized as the primary event that sparked the riots. Research Latasha Harlins's and Rodney King's cases and write an analysis essay in which you discuss why the victims were not historicized in the same manner.

3. *The Black Kids* offers a glimpse into young people's lives at a time in which racial tensions in America were high. Read one of the following texts that offer a similar perspective and cover events from different time periods. After reading, discuss the trends that are consistent across the texts. What were the major differences in approaches to racial justice, treatment of genders, and how they resolved?

Saving Savannah by Tonya Bolden

Red Summer of 1919

It All Comes Down to This by Karen English

1965 Watts Riots

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

shooting of Oscar Grant

4. There are a number of factors that define who we are, the decisions we make, and the fate of our lives. Understanding this, author Brenda Stevenson wrote *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Race Riots*. In groups of three, assign each person to read a section of the book, including portions about Latasha Harlins, storeowner and murderer Soon Ja Du, and the judge who presided over the case, Joyce Karlin. After reading, discuss how your perspective on the case shifts, if at all. Time permitting, conversations may extend into present day tensions and cases of racial injustice.

5. Throughout the book, Ashley struggles to speak out against the racist and insensitive comments her friends make to her and about their other Black classmates. Choose one of these scenes, and rewrite it either with a different outcome or from a different character's perspective. Do you notice anything new or unexpected when examining from this angle? Is there any advice or insights you would share with the characters?

6. Mental health struggles can be difficult to deal with, whether they are your own or happening to a friend or loved one. In addition to having a relationship with a licensed therapist, many find that affirmations help to overcome negative and self-sabotaging thoughts. An example of an affirmation would be: "I am worthy of friendship, even though I've made mistakes." Using Post-it notes, write three sets of affirmations: Two for two different characters in *The Black Kids*, and one for yourself. How do you think these phrases might impact the characters that you selected? How do they impact you?

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