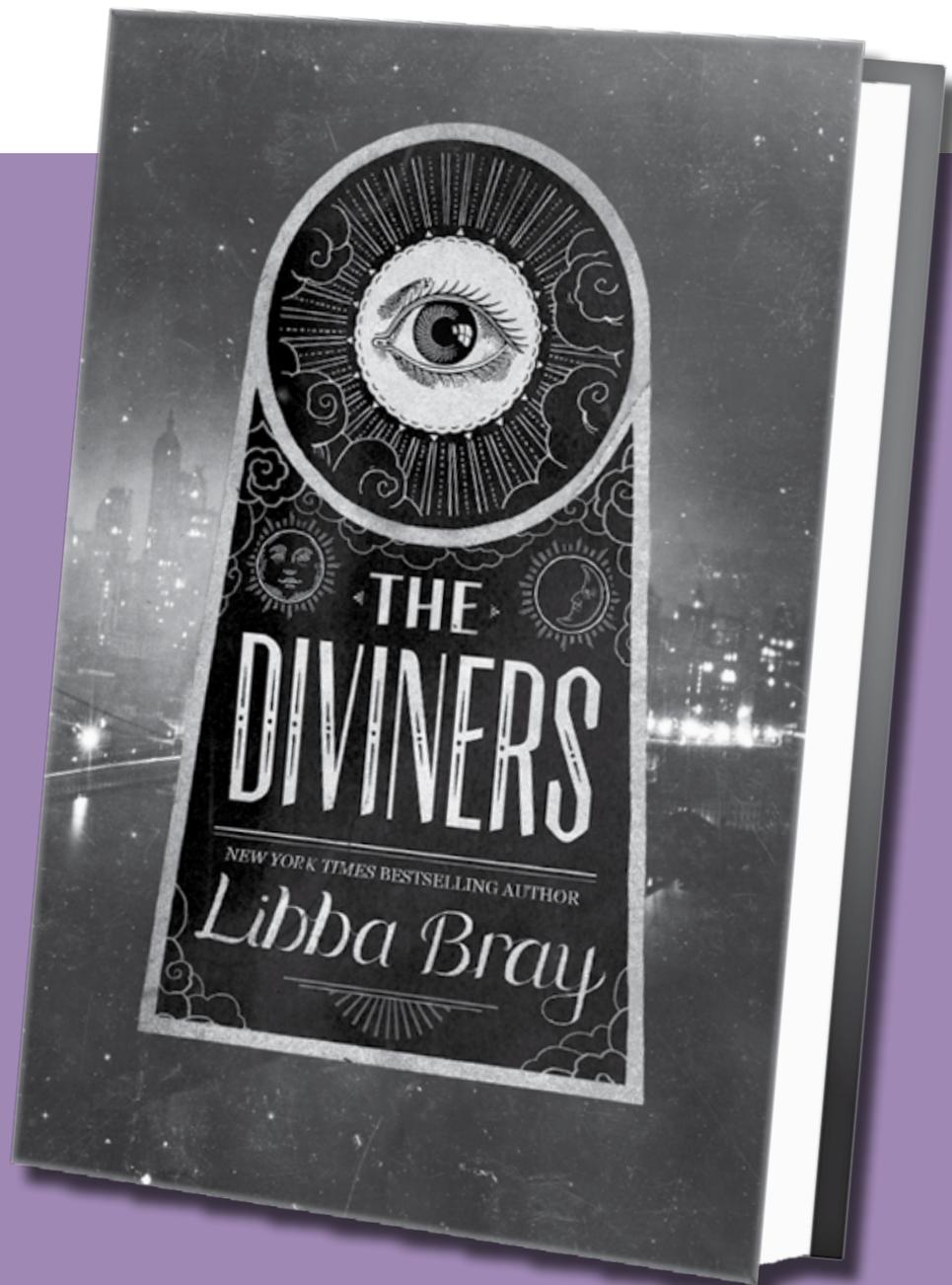


THE DIVINERS

Curriculum connections

- ❖ American History
- ❖ Social Studies
- ❖ Science

Ages: 15+



by
Libba Bray

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CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS: READING, WRITING, AND RESEARCHING

Pre-reading Activity

As a pre-reading activity, have students complete an anticipation guide structured in the following manner:

Before Reading	After Reading	Statements
		Parents know what is best for their children.
		When in danger, it is best to play it safe rather than take a risk.
		Ghosts and supernatural phenomena are products of man's imagination.
		We are all at the mercy of fate with no opportunity to change the outcomes.

- Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a “+” sign in the box next to the statements for which they agree, and a “0” next to those for which they disagree. They must commit to agreement or disagreement—there are no conditional responses. Students should be assured that there are no correct or incorrect positions.
- Once students have had the opportunity to complete the guide, the teacher reads each statement aloud and has students who agree show it by standing or raising their hands. Each student should be permitted to provide their rationale for agreeing if they wish.

- The process is repeated after reading the text(s), with students being given the opportunity to provide their rationales for keeping or changing their positions.

Exploring *The Diviners* through Writing and Research

The following questions may be utilized throughout the novel as reflective writing prompts or alternatively, they can be used to as targeted questions for class discussion and reflection.

- As the novel opens, readers quickly learn that Evie is often at opposition with her parents, finding them old fashioned and intolerant of the “modern” viewpoints she embraces. How would you assess her understanding of her parent’s expectations of her? Do you think her reaction is a typical reaction for a teen? Why or why not?
- Upon her arrival, Will tells Evie, “Seventeen’s certainly old enough to do mostly as you please. I won’t keep you on a leash as long as you keep out of trouble.” Do you find this extension of freedom to be appropriate? In your opinion, are seventeen-year-olds capable of making smart decisions?
- Consider Evie’s gift; in what ways does it prove to be a blessing or a curse? If you had an opportunity to be gifted with similar abilities, would you embrace them? Why or why not?
- Blind Bill Johnson tells Memphis, “I just need a change of luck is all.” Consider Blind Bill’s statement; how does it foreshadow the events

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to come? What role do you predict Blind Bill will play in the future?

- What is your earliest impression of Mabel? Do you find her to be a trustworthy friend to Evie? Using examples from the text, support your position.
 - Describe Will. Do you find him to be an appropriate guardian to Evie? Why or why not? Are there any ways that he and Evie are similar? How are they different?
 - Though he was known throughout his community as a healer, Memphis loses his healing abilities by trying to save his mother's life. In what ways does this experience change him? How does his role as part-time caregiver to his brother, Isaiah, change throughout the course of the story? Why do you think Memphis allows Isaiah to work with Sister Walker? Do you think it will ultimately be in his best interest?
 - Miss Addie tells Mabel, "We're not safe, you know. Not safe at all." Why does Miss Addie give Mabel such ominous news? What role do you expect Miss Addie and Miss Adelaide to play in *The Diviners*?
 - Consider the variety of settings for *The Diviners*; name the three places you believe to be most important to the story. Using textual evidence from the book, explain why you find them to be significant to the overall story structure.
 - For what reasons do you think Sam feels connected to Evie? In what ways are the two of them similar? How would you characterize the relationship between the two of them, and how does it change over the course of the novel?
 - Consider the unusual cast of secondary characters. Who are your favorite or least favorite secondary characters and why?
 - How would you describe Evie's family? In what ways has the absence/loss of her brother impacted how the family functions? Is her family in any way similar to your own? If so, in what ways?
 - Describe Mr. Woodhouse. Are his actions appropriate? In what ways is he both a help and a hindrance to Evie?
 - *The Diviners* is told in third person; how would the story be different if a specific character were telling it? Do you think changing the point of view would make the story better or worse? Why?
 - Though readers only learn about James, Evie's brother, through her shared memories, a great deal can be understood about his character. In your opinion, what kind of man was he? Was he a good brother? Use textual evidence to make your case.
 - Discuss the character traits that allow Evie, Jericho, Sam, Memphis, and Theta to ultimately persevere. How are these characters similar to each other? In what ways are they different? What character traits do you have that are like one or more of these characters?
 - What role does John Hobbs play in the story? In what ways is his manifested evil a catalyst for the choices made by Evie, Jericho, and Will?
 - Using the phrase, "This is a story about..." supply five words to describe *The Diviners*. Explain your choices.
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- Consider the novel's cover. In what ways is the image portrayed symbolic of the events that transpire throughout the course of the book?

Interdisciplinary Investigations

The Diviners focuses heavily on interactions with the supernatural in New York in the 1920s. Spiritualism was very popular for many in the United States and Western Europe at this time, particularly as a reaction to the dynamic transitions of industrialism, the Civil War, and World War I. Consider these activities to provide students the opportunity to better understand the context of this element of the novel:

- Investigate the attraction of spiritualism to the particular groups that tended to be drawn to it from the last half of the 19th century through the 1920s. Encourage students to pay close attention to the conditions among those groups that might have made spiritualism attractive and the influences on spiritualist thought and practice from other ideas, belief systems, or modes of thought.
- Central to the story's plot is the use of an Ouija board to make contact with the spirits. Instruct student groups to investigate mediums for divining and telling fortunes over time. Examples would range from ancient practices such as augury, hydromancy, numerology, or the use of oracles; to popular fortune telling such as tarot card readings, palm readings, astrology, or crystal balls; to practices contemporary with the novel such as Ouija boards, séances, dream interpretation, psychics, and phrenology.

Interesting studies might focus on how methods of divination have changed over time, and why this process was believed to yield preferable results to those used in the past.

- The popularity of spiritualism reached far into the world of celebrity. Have students investigate and present upon notable figures that were either devotees of spiritualism, or who became or expanded their celebrity as a result of the popularity of their beliefs. A short list of subjects (including both participants and skeptics) would include Eusapia Palladino, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Owen, Pierre & Marie Curie, Harry Houdini, Charles Dickens, Oliver Lodge, Victor Hugo, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Britain's Queen Victoria.

The setting for the novel, New York City, was never more dynamic than in the 1920s. This period in the city's history saw the end of the massive waves of immigration of the previous fifty years, the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities and the cultural explosion that resulted from it, and the economic boom-and-bust that characterized the Roaring Twenties and culminated in the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Assign students to investigate these elements of the novel's setting in the 1920s:

- An understanding of New York City has always included an understanding of the character of its neighborhoods. Assign student groups to investigate and present particular characteristics of New York City's key neighborhoods in the 1920s. Encourage students to recognize commonalities and distinctions in neighborhoods and boroughs. For example:

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○ To what extent were neighborhoods with strong ethnic profiles in the 1920s similar and different in character? Examples for comparison might include Harlem's Black American communities, Italian neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, Jewish communities in the Bronx, German and Polish neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens, and Irish-American communities in Midtown Manhattan and the Bronx.

○ Then, as now, New York City's compact confines forced the city to grow vertically and physical boundaries between neighborhoods were little more than crosswalks and street signs. To what extent did NYC neighborhoods in the Twenties maintain other boundaries? In this instance, students would likely focus on socioeconomic distinctions.

• New York City was the center of arguably the greatest flourishing of cultural expression in American history: the Harlem Renaissance, and the Jazz Age that coincided with it. Have students investigate the cultural features of these movements, particularly as they relate to events in the novel. Investigations should go beyond the music, art, and literature of the day, and also include how these things were furthered by radio, transportation systems, changes in communication, etc.

• The prosperity and dynamism of the Roaring Twenties in New York City can't be separated from the city's inhabitants. Assign students to investigate social groups and daily life in New York City in the 1920s, and encourage them to look at both positive and negative aspects of that life: the rise of organized crime; social tensions

related to increasing expressions of independence for women; the popularity of new sources of entertainment such as radio, the film industry, and baseball; and social tensions linked to class consciousness, ethnic differences, race, and corruption.

As the novel suggests, eugenics was a relatively popular attempt to apply scientific approaches to social development in the 1920s and 1930s. This applied to many of the world's most advanced societies at the time. Use these interdisciplinary approaches to investigate 20th century eugenics:

• In language arts classes, encourage students to investigate the rhetorical language or devices that societies in the 1920s-30s used to convey the sentiments or ideas of eugenics. Examples might include descriptive terms such as "feeble-minded", "incorrigible", references to coming from a certain quality of "stock", or applying the term "race" to ethnic or social commonalities. Discuss the origins and implications of these terms, and assign students to create vocabulary posters or Wordles (www.wordle.net) that illustrate the greater contextual meaning of their assigned terms. As an extension, have students do a comparative examination of contemporary rhetorical devices that fall on both sides of current sensibilities regarding political correctness.

• In science classes, consider the status of eugenics in the 1920s-30s as "applied science". Have students investigate the scientific qualifications of eugenics: to what extent was it based in empirical science? To what extent did it ignore or manipulate empirical science? To what extent was

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the scientific method applied to eugenic studies? What are the assets and pitfalls of applying scientific studies and data to social conditions? As an extension, have students compare early 20th century eugenics to current research in human genetics, both in terms of their qualifications as science and in terms of the social implications of the application of their discoveries (e.g., historical sterilization debates vs. today's debates over the potential for "designer babies").

- In social studies classes, have students research the social and legal movements both supporting and opposing eugenics in modernized states around the world in the 1920s-1930s. Obvious subjects for research will include the U.S., Germany, Great Britain, and France, but eugenic policies and attitudes were also extensive in Japan, the Soviet Union, Brazil, and Argentina as well as commonwealth/colonial territories such as Australia, Canada, and South Africa. All of these societies at that time enjoyed a degree of economic development that set them apart from most of the rest of the world, and at least nominally boasted democratic governments rooted in some interpretation of egalitarianism. What were the conditions, then, that allowed for the rising popularity of eugenics in these societies during the 1920s-1930s?
- In social studies classes, students may investigate methods used to promote or encourage eugenic policies and practices in society and everyday life. As a resource, teachers might examine this page from the NPR blog page series "The Picture Show" (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2011/06/01/136849387/found-in-the-archives-americas-unsettling-early-eugenics-movement>).

This provides some photographic evidence of eugenics exhibits at state and county fairs (similar to the one detailed in *The Diviners*), and the work of eugenics societies in local communities.

- In art classes, have students investigate the artistic methods and stylistic approaches used to either support or refute eugenics in the 1920s-1930s. Photography will be the most obvious medium, but teachers might also consider an investigation within movements such as socialist realism or expressionism.

In *The Diviners*, Evie's Uncle Will serves as the curator of the Museum of American Folklore, Superstition, and the Occult. While the museum is fictitious, the popular fascination with those things in the 1920's was very real.

- As the United States rose to become a world power by 1920, an intense desire to establish a quintessentially American national identity developed. Assign students to investigate the origins of some American folklore of the period and to analyze the elements that were extracted from it to establish a national identity. Basic examples could include figures from tall tales such as Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, and John Henry. Literary connections would include *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *Silas Marner*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Historical figures would include the Puritans, Daniel Boone, Abraham Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass. More advanced examples might include the concept of Manifest Destiny and Turner's *The Frontier Thesis*.

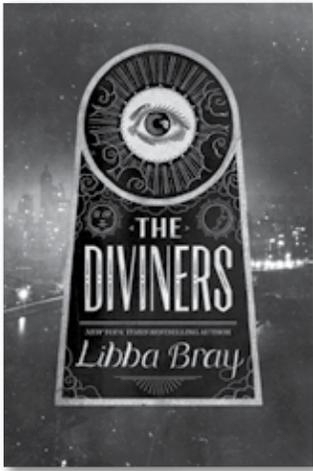
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- The popularity of oddities, the occult, and the mysterious became an opportunity for business. Students may investigate related entertainments such as the feats of escape artists like Houdini, The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus' traveling show, and the fascination with Ripley's Believe It Or Not publications. The focus of the investigation should include not only what these entertainments presented, but why they garnered such attraction.
- Consider discussing with students the connections between the investigations above and those done over eugenics, spiritualism, and the Roaring Twenties:
 - The popularity of eugenics, spiritualist religious beliefs, and the fascination with folklore and oddities are all to some degree linked to increasing interest in evolutionary theory and to increasing discontent over immigration.
 - All of these items were also linked to the dynamic changes occurring in American society at this time, as it became more urbanized, more industrialized, more cosmopolitan, and began to play a greater role in world affairs. As a result, American society also became marked by significant class tensions, changing status for women and ethnic minorities, and greater disparities in wealth. Consider the extent to which eugenics, spiritualism, and folklore might have been utilized as outlets for the tensions created by a period of such tremendous transition.



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about the book



THE DIVINERS
by Libba Bray
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Evie O'Neill has been exiled from her boring old hometown and shipped off to the bustling streets of New York City—and she is pos-i-tutely thrilled. New York is the city of speakeasies, shopping, and movie palaces! Soon enough, Evie is running with glamorous Ziegfeld girls and rakish pickpockets. The only catch is Evie has to live with her dull Uncle Will, curator of The Museum of American Folklore, Superstition, and the Occult—also known as “The Museum of the Creepy Crawlies.”

When a rash of occult-based murders comes to light, Evie and her uncle are right in the thick of the investigation. And through it all, Evie has a secret: a mysterious power that could help catch the killer—if he doesn't catch her first.

Learn more about *The Diviners* series at thedivinersseries.com.

about the author



Libba Bray is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Beauty Queens*, the 2010 Printz Award-winning *Going Bovine*, and the acclaimed Gemma Doyle trilogy. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. Visit her at www.libbabray.com.

Praise for *The Diviners*:

★ “The intricate plot and magnificently imagined details of character, dialogue and setting take hold and don't let go.”

—Kirkus Reviews

★ “Bray dives into it with the brio of the era, alternating rat-a-rat flirting with cold-blooded killings.” —Booklist