

READING
GROUP
GUIDE



"Reminiscent of Toni Morrison's
The Bluest Eye, but appropriate
for a much younger audience."

—NEW YORK TIMES

Genesis Begins Again

Alicia D. Williams

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A Newbery Honor Book

Winner of the Corretta Scott King – John Steptoe for New Talent Author Award

A Morris Award Finalist • An NPR Favorite Book of 2019

A *School Library Journal* Best Middle Grade Book of 2019

A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Middle Grade Book of 2019

ABOUT THE BOOK

Thirteen-year-old Genesis is used to starting over. Just as she begins to settle into a new neighborhood, new house, new school, the same thing happens: Genesis and her parents are once again evicted from their home, all of their possessions spread out in the front yard for anyone to see. Unless her father stops drinking and gambling, Genesis feels doomed to a life of uncertainty and humiliation. So she's shocked when the family moves to a big home in an upscale suburb with clean, safe schools. But even in a nice neighborhood, her family's problems continue—and Genesis believes it's all her fault. For years Genesis's family has made her feel less-than because she was born darker skinned like her dad, and the kids at both her old and new school bully her for the same reason. Genesis even bullies herself, by trying to find ways to lighten her skin, and by writing a long list of things she hates about her life and her appearance, especially her dark skin and kinky hair. As new friends and a perceptive music teacher help Genesis to begin believing in herself, she discovers that changing her own attitude is the first step in helping change others'.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Genesis at the beginning of the book and again at the end. How has she changed? What has brought about these changes? Talk about how the author reveals Genesis's character through action and dialogue, pointing to specific impactful scenes. What parts of Genesis's experiences or character do you most relate to?
2. Genesis has a long list of reasons to "hate" herself. How does the list start? What does she add to it, and why do you think she keeps it going? How does it affect the way she views herself? What happens to the list at the end, and why? What kind of advice or support would you have given to Genesis? Do you think that sometimes you can be your own harshest critic?
3. Genesis receives messages that darker skin makes her look ugly and that it will hold her back in life. What makes her feel this way? What is her mother's view of skin color? What is her grandmother's? What is her father's? Why do their views have such a big impact on Genesis? Do you think her family realizes what their words and actions do to her? What does Genesis do to try to change her appearance?
4. Describe Genesis's home situation, including the relationship between her parents. How has eviction affected their lives? How do they end up in Farmington Hills? Why does Genesis believe the good new situation won't last? Do you think she feels responsible for any of the turmoil?
5. Compare Farmington Hills to where Genesis lived in Detroit. Is there anything she misses about her old neighborhood? How do her old and new schools compare? Why does she want to stay there by the end of the story? How would you feel about transferring schools in the middle of the year? What are some of the challenges and benefits? What might starting again in a new environment teach you about yourself and what you value most?
6. Genesis loves her father, but he also causes much of her pain. Explain situations from the book that make this statement true. What are some of her father's strengths and weaknesses? Do you think he changes over the course of the story? Give evidence for your answer.
7. What kind of relationship does Genesis have with her mother? Describe her mother's personality and background. What are some disappointments that her mother currently faces or has faced in the past? Why does Genesis sometimes feel bad, and even guilty, about her mother's life?
8. What is Genesis's grandmother's role in her life? Discuss the positive and negative aspects of her grandmother's influence. How do her mother and grandmother get along? How does their relationship impact the way Genesis feels about her grandmother?
9. How does Genesis and Sophia's friendship evolve? What about Sophia initially interests Genesis? Why do you think they like each other? When do they disagree, and why? In what ways does Genesis envy Sophia? What qualities do you value in a friendship?

10. How does Genesis first meet Troy, and how does he help her? How does she help him? Describe some of his views on life and where they come from. What is his home life like? How does it affect him?
11. Talk about the bullying that Genesis faces in her old and new schools. What names is she called? How are Sophia and Troy bullied? What do you think motivates kids who are cruel to others in this novel and in real life? How do Sophia, Troy, and Genesis support one another?
12. Mrs. Hill quickly becomes important to Genesis. What does the music teacher give Genesis, and why? In what other ways does Mrs. Hill encourage her and make her feel better? How do their interactions start to change the way she views herself and her dark skin? Can you name a teacher or other adult who has greatly impacted your life? Explain the situation and how this person made you feel. Why do you think it's important to find someone you can connect with, whether it's an adult or a peer? Do you think it's easy to build that kind of trust?
13. What does Genesis love about the singers on the CDs Mrs. Hill loans her? Talk about the importance of music in Genesis's life and in the plot. Why do you think she changes her mind about performing in the talent show?
14. At the beginning of chapter twenty-four, both Genesis and Sophia speak up in class about the book, *The Outsiders*. Reread their discussion and relate it to what they're going through now or have gone through before. What book have you read that you most identify with? Explain why you feel this way.
15. Why does the talent show mean so much to Genesis? What does she learn in the course of preparing for it? How and why do Jason, Terrance, and Yvette try to undermine Genesis? Describe the outcome of the show in relationship to Sophia's comment, "It's not always about winning."
16. Genesis is surprised when her mother says, "I had no clue you were that brave." Explain what her mother is referring to, and talk about ways Genesis is brave in the book. Why do you think Genesis never viewed herself as being brave? Discuss why her mother says, "It's time I stop being afraid." What do you think her mother learned from Genesis?
17. Troy and Genesis have a serious exchange about the fact that she is trying to make herself look different. He says, "You were dope before the auditions. Before the fancy hair. Before all of it. Because you weren't chasing the hype." What does he mean by "chasing the hype"? How does Genesis feel about his comments? Relate his comments to the entire novel and the ideas it explores. Have you ever felt like Troy or Genesis?
18. What aspects of the plot and Genesis's life bring a sense of completion to the end? Which parts are still up in the air? What do you think will happen after the last chapter? Give some specific predictions and explain your basis for them. Has the book changed any of the ways you view yourself, your peers, or your family? Explain your answer.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Judging a Book by Its Cover (and Title)

Before reading the book, have students meet in small groups to discuss both the title and the cover. What do the title and cover suggest about the story and its content? After reading the book, have the same small groups meet to compare their predictions to the book's actual content. They should discuss how the cover art reflects the book, and then create their own cover for it.

Meet the Author

Working in pairs, have students gather information about the author, first from the book and then from the Internet. What do the acknowledgments and back cover flap reveal about Alicia D. Williams? What can be learned about her, if anything, from the story itself? What Internet resources such as the publisher's website give even more information? Does knowing more about her impact how students read or relate to the story? Have students write a letter to Alicia D. Williams, explaining how they felt about the story and what more they'd like to know about her and her experiences, or Genesis and her experiences.

And Listen to the Author!

In their research for the previous activity, some students may find this interview with Ms. Williams on NPR. Listen to it as a class, and hold a discussion to make connections between the interview and the book. Discuss the title of the interview, "A Teen Faces Colorism at School and at Home," and the meaning of colorism. Have students each write down three more questions they would ask the author if they met her. <https://n.pr/2DOrUKJ>

Is Beauty Everything?

Halfway through the book, Genesis declares, "'Beauty is everything.'" Ask students to write an essay on this topic in relationship to the novel and to our society in general. It should explore why Genesis feels this way, and how her views change throughout the book. It should also reflect on the messages that society gives about the importance of physical beauty. The students should also give their own views on the role of beauty, and how it relates to their lives and experiences.

Billie, Ella, and Etta

Mrs. Hill introduces Genesis to Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Etta James. She also makes a connection between music and art. Play some of the music mentioned in the book to the class, and invite students to create a response in art as they listen. Have them use markers, paints, or any other art medium as long as it includes color. Their responses can be abstract or representational.

Guide written by Kathleen Odean, a youth librarian for seventeen years who chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee. She now gives all-day workshops on new books for children and teens. She tweets at [@KathleenOdean](https://twitter.com/KathleenOdean).

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