

## Author Spotlight

# BRIT BENNETT



Brit Bennett was born and raised in Southern California. She graduated from Stanford University and later earned her MFA in fiction at the University of Michigan, where she won a Hopwood Award in Graduate Short Fiction as well as the 2014 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers. She is the author of *The Mothers*—a novel she started writing in high school in Oceanside, California and finished as a Zell Postgraduate Fellow at the University of Michigan. She credits mentoring professors and writing workshop peers as essential in helping her on the long path from incipient idea to debut novel. Her work is featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, and *Jezebel*. She currently lives in Encino, California.

*The Mothers* is a coming-of-age story surrounding a trio of black teens—Nadia, Luke and Aubrey—growing up in southern California. Set within a contemporary black community, Brit Bennett's mesmerizing first novel is an emotionally perceptive story about community, love, and ambition.

It is the last season of high school life for Nadia Turner, a rebellious, grief-stricken, seventeen-year-old beauty. Mourning her own mother's recent suicide, she takes up with the local pastor's son. Luke Sheppard is twenty-one, a former football star whose injury has reduced him to waiting tables at a diner. They are young; it's not serious. But the pregnancy that results from this teen romance—and the subsequent cover-up—will have an impact that goes far beyond their youth. As Nadia hides her secret from everyone, including Aubrey, her God-fearing best friend, the years move quickly. Soon, Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey are full-fledged adults and still living in debt to the choices they made that one seaside summer, caught in a love triangle they must carefully maneuver, and dogged by the constant, nagging question: What if they had chosen differently? The possibilities of the road not taken are a relentless haunt.

In entrancing, lyrical prose, *The Mothers* asks whether a "what if" can be more powerful than an experience itself. If, as time passes, we must always live in servitude to the decisions of our younger selves, to the communities that have parented us, and to the decisions we make that shape our lives forever.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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## Key Discussion Topics and Questions for *The Mothers*

**Teen identity:** The main character, Nadia, is the only person in her family to go to college and one of the few from her church community to leave after high school. She is ambitious—in part to make up for the limits her own existence imposed upon her mother—but she is also made to feel uncomfortable about how her ambition makes her different. To what degree do you think her discomfort about her ambition is just in her head, and to what degree do you think her community sees her as an outsider because of it? Why is leaving home so revolutionary for Nadia? What can her academic accomplishments give her that her home community cannot?

**Racial and cultural identity:** Nadia is a black teen who goes to a black church but a mostly white school, on the edge of a military base. She conducts herself slightly differently in these different worlds. Luke, her boyfriend, is a young black man from the same school and community, but when he ends up in the hospital, he becomes conscious of how the Hispanic male nurse suffers from others' stereotypes. How does the author approach identity in relation to race? How must Nadia change the way she interacts with people inside or outside of her community?

**Teen pregnancy:** When Nadia is confronted with the possibility of parenthood at age 17 (a situation she knows her mother faced with Nadia's own birth), she must make decisions that she understands will change her life forever, regardless of whether the pregnancy is carried to term. *The Mothers* strives to handle teen pregnancy with compassion and wisdom, portraying it as a life-transforming experience with incalculable ramifications. Why do you think Nadia makes the choices she does? How do these choices affect her life, Luke's life, and even the larger community?

**Issues of masculinity:** Luke was a star high school football player who was destined for a great college athletic scholarship and career, but then a career-ending injury changed everything. He must struggle to redefine his own sense of himself, his potential and expectations, and what kind of man he wants to be. Later in the book he befriends a male physical therapist who shows Luke that he, too, has the potential for ministering to the sick or injured—which is a sort of “mothering” in itself. How does Luke's sense of masculinity change, before and after his injury? How does the author explore masculinity in the depiction of Nadia's father, a professional military man who must learn to connect with his daughter? Do you think that, in the end, both father and daughter have found a way to communicate and show their love to each other?

**Family and community:** The novel has a distinct nucleus, made up of “The Mothers,” the elderly women of the black church community who watch over the small-town goings-on with a presence that evokes the tone of a fable. Their chorus, Greek in format, shows the insularity and defiance of a small, loving community. How do “The Mothers” embody their community? In what ways do they impose their own experiences—their beliefs, their upbringings, their age—on the younger generation?

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## Key Discussion Topics and Questions for *The Mothers* continued

**The perceived hypocrisies of an older generation:** The church mothers watch and judge Nadia and her peers while also revealing certain potentially hypocritical things about their own pasts. And Luke's parents secretly counsel him to act in ways that seem to oppose their publicly held views. Do you think *The Mothers* suggests that older generations may hold younger people to different standards than they have held themselves? Is it possible that the older generation is both hypocritical *and* wise? How can we benefit from listening to our elders?

**Female friendship:** Another focus of the book is Nadia's relationship with her best friend, Aubrey, as they help each other through adolescence and motherlessness. It provides poignant commentary about the ways women rely on one another, and about the necessity of navigating hard truths with the people we love. How do Nadia and Aubrey change over the course of the book—both within their friendship and outside of it? What does this friendship give each of the girls?

**Grief and loss:** *The Mothers* also functions as a meditation on grief. As Nadia mourns her own mother's recent suicide, she finds solace in her friend Aubrey, in her work at the church, and in the way she must work through her decision to terminate her pregnancy. As Nadia maneuvers the adolescent world and beyond, how does her grief change her? Do you think it ultimately strengthens her? Weakens her?

**Audience:** Do you think a book can be both for teens and adults? Is there a point at which teen lives and adult lives inevitably overlap?

Source: [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)

