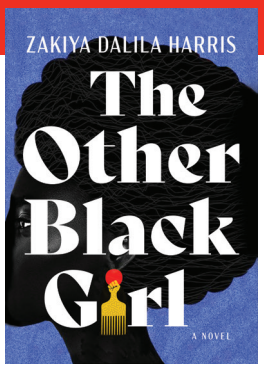


A READING GROUP GUIDE



This reading group guide for **The Other Black Girl** *includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

Two young Black women, Nella and Hazel, meet against the starkly white backdrop of New York City book publishing. While working together at Wagner Books, they've only just started swapping natural hair-care tips when a string of uncomfortable events elevates Hazel to office darling, and leaves Nella in the dust. Then the notes begin to appear on Nella's desk: *LEAVE WAGNER. NOW.* A whip-smart, satirical, and dynamic thriller, *The Other Black Girl* is a sly social commentary that is perfect for anyone who has ever felt manipulated, threatened, or overlooked in the workplace. *The Other Black Girl* will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very last twist.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the author set this novel in the book publishing industry? How would the story unfold in another setting? How would it be similar or different?

2. Recalling Colin Franklin's novel, *Needles and Pins*, have you ever read a book that was problematic? What was the title and what made it problematic? Why do you think it was able to get published? Was Nella right about confronting Colin about the stereotypes in *Needles and Pins*?

3. At what point in the story did you feel suspicious of Hazel? What made her more likable to people in the office?

4. The code question to enter the Resistance is, if an asteroid crashes into the Earth and destroys all Black folk except one, who do you save: Stacey Dash or Ben Carson? Why do think the author chose Stacey and Ben specifically? Would they be considered OBGs? How would you answer the code question and why?

5. How do you feel about Nella and Owen's relationship? Does he truly understand the microaggressions Nella experiences at work? Do you think she feels guilt or insecurities about having a boyfriend who is white?

6. Nella appears to be embarrassed by her inability to tie scarves, and about not making Black friends sooner or joining

a Black sorority in college. Why does Nella question her Blackness? Do you think she's too hard on herself?

7. Why do you think the author wanted to highlight how Black women feel competitive toward one another in white corporate America? How do you think people feel when they are the only person of color at work? Why might people of color feel competitive in white work spaces?

8. In the novel, Diana and Kendra Rae posed for a 1980s magazine article titled "A New Era in Publishing?" How has publishing changed since the eighties? Consider the kinds of books that are published today. Are we currently in a new era of publishing?

9. What is Richard's role in the novel? Why is he threatened by Black women? How does he benefit from "fixing" Black women?

10. What does this book say about code-switching and selling out? What, if anything, separates the two? What are examples of code-switching?

11. What is the significance and importance of hair to Black women? Why do you think Black women take such pride in their hair?

12. Malaika and Nella have a very close friendship. How is the relationship between Nella and Malaika ultimately similar to the relationship of Kendra Rae and Diana?

13. Did the ending make you more optimistic or fearful? How could the Resistance stop OBGs? What could they have done differently to stop Hazel?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Was there ever a time that you felt othered or different during you education or in your workplace? How did you overcome this? What made you different from others?

2. *The Other Black Girl* has been compared to many movies: *The Devil Wears Prada*, *The Stepford Wives*, and *Get Out*. What movie would you compare it to? With your book club, have a movie night and watch a film that reminds you of the novel.

3. *The Other Black Girl* will soon be a Hulu series. Discuss which actors you would cast. Is there anything about the novel that you would change for the series?



An interview with Zakiya Dalila Harris

Author of *The Other Black Girl*



When and how did you first become interested in writing?

I first fell in love with writing when I fell in love with books at the age of six or seven. I was really into series novels, like Goosebumps and Animorphs and The Series of Unfortunate Events. I'd spend hours curled up in an empty laundry basket filling notebook upon notebook with stories of my own—scary stories, stories about superheroes, stories about girls like me.

I'd also be remiss not to say that my father teaches journalism and had an op-ed column in a Connecticut newspaper for nearly twenty years, so he was often reading my stories, commending and critiquing them, and telling me to keep writing. He also encouraged me by example. I often saw him sit down and write whenever he wasn't teaching, and heard him talk with my mom about the reception of his latest piece at the dinner table. Through him, I had the good fortune of learning early on that it was possible to make a career out of loving what you do.

But perhaps the most tangible turning point for my love of writing was when I came across a writing contest in *American Girl* magazine at age twelve. I wasn't a particularly competitive or confident kid when it came to most things, but when I saw the contest prompt, which was to write a story accompanying the illustration they'd provided, I thought, "I can totally do this." I entered the contest without telling either of my parents; a few months later, we discovered that I'd won. My story appeared in the May/June 2006 issue of the magazine, and it did loads for my self-esteem as a writer.

Tell us about *The Other Black Girl* and why you wrote it.

The idea for *The Other Black Girl* came to me when I was working in the editorial department at Knopf Doubleday. I was washing my hands in the bathroom when another Black woman came out of the stall. I was surprised to see her—as far as I knew, no other Black people worked on my floor, and I could tell she wasn't an author because she had an employee ID. But when I tried to catch her eye in the mirror in a kind of solidarity, she didn't meet my gaze.

I don't believe the slight was intentional. But my imagination still ran off with all the possible reasons why this other Black woman hadn't spoken to me. I couldn't help but think of the truism that when it comes to settings that are traditionally majority-white, there's often just one Black person, supposedly hired to "fill a quota." While this truism tends to be the source of many jokes among Black people, it definitely comes from a place of truth—and this truth was at the forefront of my mind as I wrote about Nella's experiences as the only Black employee at Wagner Books.

As I fell deeper into writing *The OBG*, I grew more and more interested in the why of this truth—and because of this, I would also say this book is also about the cost of success and the fine line between "assimilation" and "selling out."

What was the most difficult part of writing *The Other Black Girl*?

There are so many variables in this book. Not only are there four different perspectives; there are two different timelines, and it was very tricky plotting all of these moving parts while also making sure each reveal would feel both surprising and satisfying for the reader. It took a lot of "let's see what happens here if I move that there," and a ton of editorial conversations with my wonderful agent and editor, for me to feel like I'd balanced every element.

***Publishers Weekly* described *The Other Black Girl* as a "cheeky blend of horror, suspense, and cultural commentary." How are you influenced by these genres, and what interests you about them?**

I got into horror at a very young age. In addition to reading Goosebumps, I loved watching shows like *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* and *The Twilight Zone*. Rod Serling's monologues at the beginning of every episode terrified me, but I loved how unsettled and curious they made me feel, and the questions they raised. Some form of doom would strike for the characters, but would they get out of it? And in some cases—because sometimes the protagonists were unlikable—would I even want them to get out of it?

As I got older, I fell more in love with horror and psychological thrillers and their ability to express social commentary the way that *The Twilight Zone* did. So many writers have done this—Jordan Peele's *Get Out* comes to mind, as well as Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, in which the familiar trope of time travel evokes the terrors of slavery in an especially horrifying way. Genre elements allow us all to engage with topics that might otherwise feel inaccessible or too uncomfortable to speak about.

The book cover is amazing—what's the backstory?

One of my favorite parts of working in editorial was seeing the behind-the-scenes aspects of the book design process, and one of my favorite wannabe-writer daydreams was imagining what my own book cover would look like one day. When it came time to talk covers for *The OBG*, I knew that I wanted a real Black artist to design the cover if possible, so after some brainstorming, my agent and I sent my editor a list of Black artists whose work we felt truly aligned with the essence of my novel.

Since my novel is a blend of many different genres, our eyes were on artists whose work also blended sensibilities. Temi Coker's work—much of which features radiant Black subjects surrounded by bright, electric colors and patterns—did this kind of blending, and then some. His art centers Blackness so beautifully, and I wanted the cover of my novel to also unmistakably center Blackness.

Amazingly, my wonderful team at Atria was able to license this incredible piece by Temi Coker for the cover—which, by the way, I am very obsessed with.

Do you have anything in common with Nella, your protagonist? And in what ways are you different?

Despite the fact that I, too, was once the only Black girl working at my company, this book is not a roman à clef. That being said, I gave Nella many of my own personal experiences and characteristics. Like Nella, I've had a complicated relationship with my own identity ever since I was a kid. I attended a mostly-white elementary school and grew up in a mostly-white neighborhood in Connecticut, so when I went on to attend middle school and high school—both of which were a lot more diverse and had a lot more Black people—I experienced a bit of culture shock meeting people who had the same skin color as I did. I was sometimes made fun of for the way I spoke ("like a white girl"), and was often the only Black person in my advanced level classes. However, while Nella didn't make her first real Black friend until her early twenties, I was lucky enough to make an amazing group of Black friends my first year of college.

Another notable difference between Nella and me are our aspirations: While she dreams of becoming an editor, my biggest dream has always been to write. I enjoyed working in publishing, and was promoted to assistant editor after two years, but as I was given more and more responsibility, I realized I'd need to decide which track I wanted to dedicate all of my time to. I knew I couldn't fully commit to both. So, after a few weeks of really getting into *The OBG*, I decided to quit publishing and see this through instead.

What's your writing process like, and what do you do when you get stuck?

I tend to write first drafts of everything by hand, because I find that I am much more lenient with myself when I'm writing versus typing. I'll cross things out on the page; I'll draw arrows all over everything. I'll often revise my writing as I transcribe it to a computer, filling in more and more details as I go along.

Also—and this is slightly controversial—I am one of those weirdos who likes listening to music whenever I'm writing. Yes, music with words, and no, not just to drown out other noise. I need it. The kind of music depends on my mood and the time of day, but my go-to is jazz: Ella Fitzgerald, Johnny Hartman, Julie London, Nancy Wilson.

Whenever I feel like I'm stuck, I'll either move to a different part of the story that I haven't started yet, or I'll walk away from it entirely. I can usually tell the point at which it's worth it for me to take a break, rather than keep turning my gears in the same place for too long. Nine times out of ten I'll come back to it later, refreshed, and the answer will come to me then.

Who or what are a few of your biggest creative influences?

I've been a fan of Lucille Ball for most of my life. She was hilarious and brilliant, but I've always admired her career path. She continued to pursue her dream of becoming an actress despite people not thinking she was very good, and took supporting roles for years before getting her big break. I think there's something so beautiful about that.

Another creative influence of mine is Issa Rae, whose path is really inspiring to me, too. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* spoke to my awkward nineteen-year-old soul in a way unlike any other show before, and I really appreciate how she's undeniably herself in everything she does—but she's also willing to explore genres outside of comedy.

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

I truly hope that *The Other Black Girl* inspires thoughtful, hard conversations between people of different backgrounds, just as I hope it inspires conversations about diversity, identity, and performative politics.

I also want readers to come away from my book with a perspective that's different from what they're used to seeing in other media and entertainment. While my protagonists are all Black women who have faced the often-suffocating pressures of corporate white America, and white America in general, they are not a monolith. They each have their own lived experience and their own worldview, and they make their own independent choices. Sometimes, their choices might be seen as problematic. But they all deserve to be seen.

@ZakiyaDalilaHarris **@Zakiya_Harris**



The Other Black Girl Playlist



"I'm Every Woman" by Chaka Khan

Whatever you want
Whatever you need
Anything you want done, Baby, I'll do it, naturally

I grew up singing (very poorly) along to this song in the car with my mom. Only when I grew older did I start to ponder what the words "I'm every woman" really meant—not just for women, but for Black women. For centuries, we've done it all: looked after other people's children, cleaned other people's houses, spoken out against injustice...all while being consistently delegated to the bottom of society's totem pole, and all while being told that our pain doesn't matter.

And yet: We're still here, and we're killing it. I can't help but feel that the four female protagonists of my book have felt this sense of pride at various points in their lives.



"Don't Touch My Hair" by Solange feat. Sampha

The title of this song says it all, as does the title of this Solange album, *A Seat at the Table*. No doubt Nella has blasted this on particularly hard days at the office, and if she could, she'd make this album required listening for everybody at Wagner Books.



"Appletree" by Erykah Badu

So many Kendra Rae–adjacent truths are dropped in this song, like, "I work at pleasin' me cause I can't please you and that's why I do what I do." I can see her pouring herself a glass of wine and bopping along to Erykah Badu on her living room couch, unconcerned about whether or not anybody else wants to sit under her apple tree. Because she's good either way.



“Savage (Remix)” by Megan Thee Stallion feat. Beyoncé

Swagger. Style. Self-confidence. If this song doesn’t remind me of Hazel’s fierce determination, I’m not sure what does. I envision her blasting this song every morning she wakes up and gets ready to go into the office.



“9 to 5” by Dolly Parton

How could I concoct a playlist based on a book that follows a disgruntled editorial assistant without including the ultimate *God, I hate my job* anthem? The answer is, I couldn’t. The 1980 movie *9 to 5* might be dated in some respects, but lines like “They just use your mind and they never give you credit” and “You would think that I would deserve a fair promotion” are just too on the nose to ignore. Also, Dolly’s vocals provide a shot of adrenaline that can’t be found even in the finest cup of Keurig coffee.



“Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” by Marvin Gaye

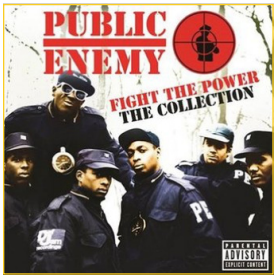
One of my favorite artistic evolutions of all time is Marvin Gaye’s shift from singing feel-good music to music that was socially conscious. This change in self-expression is something I can personally relate to, and it likewise echoes the pivot Nella made shortly after moving to the city and experiencing her own racial awakening. Nella definitely listens to this song anytime she grows tired of reading about “trigger happy policing” in the news. Which is—you know—pretty often.



“OCTAVIA” by Jamila Woods

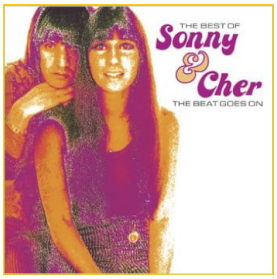
You the missing piece, OG technology, they stole you
Don’t ever let ‘em knock the way you talk
The language you evolve your natural genius
Merch it

If you can’t tell already, I’m all for songs that combine gorgeous melodies with grabby messages, and if I could, I’d put Jamila Woods’s entire *LEGACY! LEGACY!* album on this playlist. I love how every song is named for an artist of color who came before, from Zora Neale Hurston to Eartha Kitt to James Baldwin. The “Octavia” in this song is none other than Octavia Butler, to whom I was first introduced in high school, and was absolutely influenced by while laying down the genre-bending elements of this novel.



“Fight the Power” by Public Enemy

Both Nella and Malaika got to know Bed-Stuy through Spike Lee’s eyes as teenagers before moving to Brooklyn and experiencing it in the flesh. So, they are very familiar with Public Enemy’s call to “fight the powers that be”...even if they sometimes stress about being gentrifiers themselves.



"The Beat Goes On" by Sonny & Cher

Full disclaimer: Britney Spears's cover of this song was the first time I ever heard it, but it didn't take me long to discover Sonny & Cher's version, or to decide that "Drums keep pounding a rhythm to the brain" is one of the most pleasing song lyrics written, ever.

I'm always a little blown away by this song every time I hear it, because even though its "some things never change" message is so darn simple, it always feels too darn relevant. Its message is one all of the protagonists in the book can relate to in some capacity, but having grown up hearing this song on the radio, it resonates with Diana and Kendra Rae the most.



"I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free" by Nina Simone

Another song that always feels timely. Nina Simone was no stranger to saying what needed to be said, even if it meant sacrificing her career or jeopardizing her legacy. This song has Kendra Rae's name written all over it.



"Blue in Green" by Miles Davis

When I first started writing this book, I listened to the soundtrack for *If Beale Street Could Talk* on loop in the background, which in turn introduced me to this dreamy, wistful Miles Davis song. There is a loneliness to it, but there's a hushed temerity to it, too, and I imagine Diana losing herself in it on a late evening in the office.



"Beautiful Brother of Mine" by Curtis Mayfield

Beautiful sister of mine
I'm glad we both think it's now time
To really show what we can do
And prove that Black pride is now true

I opened this playlist with a song I grew up listening to, so it feels right to close with an artist I grew up listening to. It also feels right to end with a song that preaches Black unity. While the protagonists in my book are by no means a monolith—all have different ideas of what it means to be successful—they are all connected by the experience of being a Black woman in America. And that's nothing to bat an eye at.



The Other Black Girl
Character Map

MAIN CHARACTERS

1

Nella Rogers
Wagner Books
Editorial Assistant

2

Hazel-Mae McCall
New Wagner Books
Editorial Assistant

3

Kendra Rae Phillips
a.k.a. Kenny
Burning Heart Editor

4

Diana Gordon
Author of
Burning Heart

5

Richard Wagner
a.k.a. Dick Wagner
Wagner Books Publisher

6

Shani Edmonds
New member of
The Resistance

7

Vera Parini
Wagner Books Editor
Nella's boss

8

Denise Cummings
Leader of
The Resistance

9

Malaika
Nella's best friend

10

Owen
Nella's boyfriend

11

Jesse Watson
Activist