

"Profoundly moving." —*The Boston Globe*

YAA GYASI

Author of
HOMEGOING



TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM

A NOVEL

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

**BOOK
CLUB
KIT**



VINTAGE

Thank you for writing this book! What was your inspiration for centering this novel on addiction and loss, specifically a shameful loss for Gifty and her mother?

This novel was inspired by the work of my dear friend, a neuroscientist who studies the neural circuitry of reward seeking behavior. Much of the research that Gifty does in this novel is based on my friend's doctoral work. I wanted to see if I could build a narrative around this research that sought to address things like addiction and depression and other psychiatric illnesses that are often stigmatized, to address shame without endorsing it.

The relationship and tension between religion and science is so much a part of Gifty's identity. With this intersection, what did you wish to convey about her character?

Gifty grows up in a Pentecostal church in Alabama. She's a true believer, a pious child who wants desperately to follow the teachings of her Bible. When her brother succumbs to his addiction she finds that she cannot reconcile his suffering with the workings of a loving God and she moves away from her faith, seeking answers elsewhere. As an adult, she turns to neuroscience as a way of processing, locating, her brother's addiction. She is a character



who is very controlled, and very interested in controlling what she can, mostly because her childhood was filled with so much chaos. As she says, religion and science were ways of seeing.

Gifty gives her family members different names in her journal entries. What is the importance of these names in how she views her family and processes events?

I think the codenames have the effect of allowing Gifty to feel free to talk about her family in ways that she might not otherwise, to name what is happening to her, name her pain and her family's part in her pain, without worrying about exposure or shame. It's artifice but it's also kind of comfort.

Her brother feels like a present part of her life after his passing, in part due to the structure of...

...the book. How did you decide on the timeline of events in this novel?

I knew that it was a book that was going to be filled with absence and loss and to counteract that I wanted to make those losses feel like a kind of presence. The timeline helps me achieve this. As Gifty goes about her research, studying mice who are addicted to Ensure, she cannot help but think about her brother and so it felt natural that the novel wouldn't be linear. Gifty is a character for whom the past is always present. Her brother is always present.

This book contains many specific details about her lab, mice, and experiments. How did you go about this research?

It started with a trip to my friend's lab at Stanford where I shadowed her while she performed her research. I also read many scientific papers, profiles of neuroscientists, Youtube videos of experiments and lectures. I was fortunate to have my friend to bounce ideas off of and ask questions.

What is a book that you've read recently that has given you hope?

While not necessarily a hopeful book, *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler left me feeling better equipped to deal with the times that we are living in and the times ahead.

Q & A

**IN CONVERSATION WITH
AUTHOR, YAA GYASI**



READING GROUP GUIDE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom*, a powerful coming-of-age story of a young woman on a quest for approval and forgiveness in the wake of the devastating loss of her brother to drug overdose—and for a sense of belonging in a world of unknowns.

QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do Gifty and her mother use prayer differently throughout their lives, and especially after Nana's death? What variations of prayer do the two women discover in the novel?
- How does Gifty approach the moral predicament of running her science experiments on mice? What elements of her faith and sense of connection to God's creations are evident in how she treats the mice?
- Consider the stigmas surrounding addiction, especially opioid addiction, the rates of which are exploding in today's society. What other stigmas and expectations was Nana responding to by not asking for help to deal with his addiction, and others not doing more to help?
- In what ways does Gifty take on the role of caretaker for those in her life? Who, if anyone, takes care of Gifty?
- Gifty admits that she values both God and sciences as lenses through which to see the world that both "failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning." Why does she have to lead with the caveat that she "would never say [this] in a lecture or a presentation or, God

forbid, a paper”)? How does the extreme belief in science mimic the faith of the religious zealots she turned away from?

- What messages do Gifty and Nana hear about the intersection of race and poverty in their youth church meetings? How do the siblings respond to the conflation of the two—and what does the assumption that African countries are impoverished or need saving by missionaries suggest about the colonial power dynamic engrained in our society?
- Gifty refers to her relationship with her mother as an “experiment.” Are there similarities in the way Gifty approaches her work and her relationship with her mother? How did the separate events of losing the Chin Chin Man and Nana’s death affect their relationship? Throughout the course of their lives, how does Gifty determine whether or not her and her mother are “going to be ok?”
- Throughout the book, Gifty struggles to find a sense of community in places where people traditionally find it (school, work, family, church, etc.). What life experiences shape her understanding of community? In what ways does this affect her ability to build relationships with the people in her life (Anna, Raymond, Katherine, Han)?
- Explore the idea of humans as the only animal “who believed he had transcended his Kingdom.” How does this idea influence Gifty’s relationship with science? With religion?
- Describe the difference between Gifty’s connection to Ghana and her connection to Alabama. In what ways does she feel connected to her Ghanaian ancestry?
- How does Gifty feel when she overhears congregants gossiping about her family? How does this experience influence her relationship with the church? With her family? With God?
- Gifty privately considers her work in the lab as holy—“if not holy, then at least sacrosanct.” Explain her reasoning, and why she chooses not to discuss this feeling with anyone.



STAY WITH ME AYOBAMI ADEBEYO

FRIDAY BLACK NANA KWAME ADJEI-BRENYAH

AMERICANAH CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

VOYAGE OF THE SABLE VENUS ROBIN COSTE LEWIS

LOST AND WANTED NELL FREUDENBERGER

THE SIGNATURE OF ALL THINGS ELIZABETH GILBERT

WAYWARD LIVES, BEAUTIFUL EXPERIMENTS SAIDIYA HARTMAN

LAB GIRL HOPE JAHREN

AMERICAN MARRIAGE TAYARI JONES

EUPHORIA LILY KING

BOY, SNOW, BIRD HELEN OYEYEMI

ORDINARY LIGHT TRACY K. SMITH

SALVAGE THE BONES JESMYN WARD



SUGGESTED READING