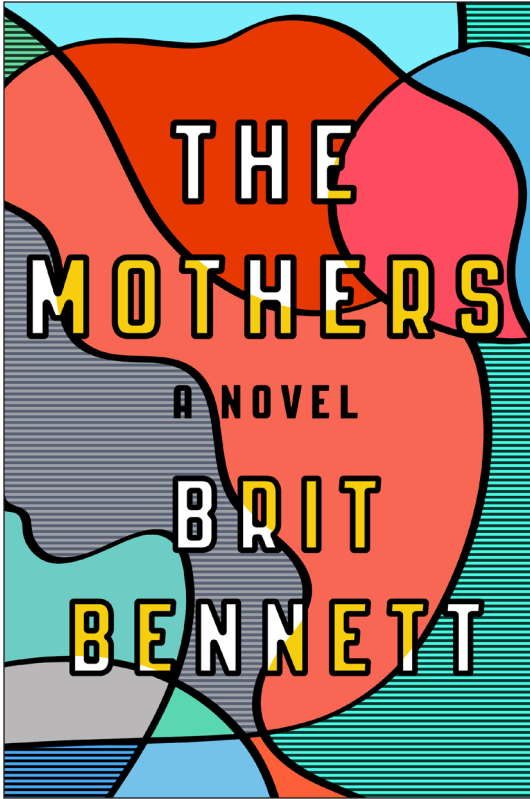


THE MOTHERS

by BRIT BENNETT



► **AUDIENCE:**

Similar to books like *The Goldfinch*, *Looking For Alaska*, and *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*, *The Mothers* has both adult and young adult appeal. The writing, which meshes adult content and style with teenage stories and worlds, is both accessible and artistically compelling.

KEY DISCUSSION TOPICS

► **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 upon the end of high school. She is ambitious—in part to make up for the limits her own existence imposed upon her mother—but also made to feel uncomfortable about how her ambition makes her different.

► **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 comports herself slightly differently in these different worlds. Luke, her boyfriend, is a young black man from this same school and community, but when he ends up in the hospital, he becomes conscious of how the wonderful Hispanic male nurse suffers from others' stereotypes.

The main characters in *The Mothers* are African-American—insomuch as race is tied into everything, the characters must navigate their world as young black men and women, and they do so with grace, empathy and keenly observed understanding.

► **TEEN PREGNANCY:**

When the main character, Nadia, is confronted with the possibility of parenthood at age 17 (a situation she knows her own mother faced as well with her own birth), she must make decisions that will change her life forever. Faced with questions about her own mother—whom she is newly grieving—and what it means to be part of a family unit, Nadia's journey depicts pregnancy as the life-altering process it is, regardless of whether the pregnancy is carried to term. Teen pregnancy is handled deftly, with compassion and wisdom, portrayed as a life-transformative experience with incalculable ramifications.

► **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 potential for ministering to the sick or injured—which is a sort of “mothering” in itself. Another place that the author explores issues of masculinity is in her depiction of Nadia’s father. He is a professional military man who begins the book very cold and unemotional, distanced from his daughter, but by the end both father and daughter find a way to communicate and show their love to one another.

► **THE PERCEIVED HYPOCRISIES OF AN OLDER GENERATION:**

The book shows many different ways that older generations may hold younger people to different standards than they may have held themselves. Part of the book is narrated by a choral group of “church mothers” as they watch and judge Nadia and her peers, but also reveal certain things about their own pasts. Hypocrisy can also be seen in the way that Luke’s parents—who are the heads of the church, and very openly anti-abortion—secretly counsel him to act in ways that oppose their publicly held views.

► **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 on-goings with a fable-like presence. Their chorus, Greek in format, shows the insularity and defiance of a small, loving community.

► **FEMALE FRIENDSHIP:**

The book also focuses on Nadia’s relationship with her best friend, Aubrey, as both help one another through adolescence and motherlessness. It makes poignant commentary about the ways women rely on one another, and about the necessity of navigating hard truths with the people we love.

► **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, grief becomes a palpable undercurrent, and the reader sees the ways in which it changes and strengthens her.