

National Book Award Finalist

akwaeke emezi

BITTER



DISCUSSION GUIDE

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About the Book

From National Book Award finalist Akwaeke Emezi comes a companion novel to the critically acclaimed *Pet* that explores the importance and cost of social revolution—and how youth lead the way.

After a childhood in foster care, Bitter is thrilled to have been chosen to attend Eucalyptus, a special school where she can focus on her painting surrounded by other creative teens. But outside this haven, the streets are filled with protests against the deep injustices that grip the city of Lucille.

Bitter's instinct is to stay safe within the walls of Eucalyptus . . . but her friends aren't willing to settle for a world that's so far away from what they deserve. Pulled between old friendships, her artistic passion, and a new romance, Bitter isn't sure where she belongs—in the studio or in the streets. And if she does find a way to help the revolution while being true to who she is, she must also ask: At what cost?

This timely and riveting novel examines the power of youth, protest, and art.



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Themes:

Art, Fairness,
Justice & Equality,
Family &
Relationships



Photo credit: Akwaeke Emezi

About the Author

Akwaeke Emezi (they/them) is the author of *Pet*, a finalist for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, a Walter Honor Book and a Stonewall Honor Book; the *New York Times* bestseller *The Death of Vivek Oji*, which was a finalist for the Dylan Thomas Prize, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the PEN/Jean Stein Award; *Freshwater*, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book and shortlisted for the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize; and most recently, *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir*, the Stonewall Israel Fishman Non-Fiction Award winner. Their debut poetry collection, *Content Warning: Everything*, is forthcoming in 2022. Selected as a 5 Under 35 honoree by the National Book Foundation, they are based in liminal spaces.

Pre-Reading

1. What does it mean to be safe? What does safe feel like to you? How do you know if you are safe?
2. Reflect on the statement: "The ends justify the means." Do you think this statement is true? Why or why not?
3. Define *revolution*. What do revolutions look like? How has history viewed revolutions?

Discussion Questions

1. The story opens with the following sentence: "Bitter had no interest in the revolution." (p. 1) Why does she feel this way? What does the world expect her, as a teenager, to do? Is this burden fair? Why or why not?
2. What is happening in the city of Lucille?
3. Reflect on the following passages from the *Bitter*.
 - a. "It was no wonder the people took to the streets, masses swallowing the roads and sidewalks, because in a world that wanted you dead, you had to scream and fight for your aliveness." (p. 2)
 - b. "Oh, come on. You can't throw away a whole city just because it's broken." (p. 19)
 - c. "Everyone does keep fighting and fighting, one generation after another, and nothing changes. If you born lucky, then you live lucky. Otherwise . . . It is what it is." (p. 37)
 - d. "I don't believe that you think nothing can change. You're an artist! You imagine things all the time, and you're trying to tell me that you can't imagine anything different from this? Another kind of world? That you've *never* imagined something better than what's happening now?" (p. 38)
 - e. "And hope is not a waste of time. Hope is a *discipline*."* (p. 42)
 - f. "Really? Because it does feel like if everyone's not out there like Assata, then they not doing enough." (p. 69)
 - g. "The revolution needs artists, just like it needs healers and storytellers, just like it needs the organizers and protesters. It's all one big organism working together." (p. 72)
 - h. "I am not broken," [Ube] said. "I am already whole." (p. 154)
 - i. "All freedoms are terrible," [Ube] said. "That's the part they never tell you." (p. 248)
4. Describe Eucalyptus. Who is enrolled at this school? How were these young people selected? Why did Bitter like being at this school? What was life like for her before Eucalyptus? What is Miss Virtue's role in the school, and how does Bitter feel about her?
5. Who is Blessing? Who is Alex? What is their relationship with Bitter?
6. What is Assata? (p. 8) Who are its members? What is their role in the protests? What are they fighting for? Why does Bitter feel like an outsider to Assata?
7. Who is Eddie? Why are she and Bitter not speaking at the beginning of the story? Track how their relationship changes throughout the story.
8. Assata is a secretive group; their safe house is impenetrable to outsiders. Who was able to breach the security at the safe house? Who are Ube, Hibiscus, and Sunflower?
9. How do Bitter and Aloe meet? (p. 16) Describe their relationship throughout the book.

*The idea of hope as a discipline was inspired by Mariame Kaba.

Discussion Questions

(continued)

10. Bitter doesn't want to leave Eucalyptus after graduation. What is the underlying fear that makes her want to stay? Describe her conversation with Miss Virtue. (pp. 46–52)
11. Bitter is able to make her drawings come to life. How does she give life to her artistic creations? Why does she keep her ability a secret?
12. Why are the residents of Lucille angry at Dian Theron and the mayor? How has Theron's money shaped and influenced the city of Lucille and its governance?
13. Why was Bitter hesitant to go to the protests? What happened when she tried to join her friends? (pp. 89–91)
14. What happened to Eddie during the protest? What did Bitter do to demonstrate her rage? (pp. 93–112)
15. The creature tells Bitter, "Call me what you wanted. . . . It was not help. . . . Call me what you wanted, child. . . . Call me Vengeance." (pp. 111–112) Define *vengeance*. Is your definition applicable to the creature Bitter summoned? Do you think Vengeance is an angel? Explain.
16. Bitter prayed that the monsters be eliminated, and Vengeance and the other angels acted to carry out that task. How did the sculptures come alive? Why is Assata torn? What did Vengeance and the other angels do to Lucille during their hunt?
17. How are Miss Virtue and Vengeance connected? How does this knowledge affect the Eucalyptus students?
18. What is Bitter's power as the "gatekeeper"? (p. 234)

Post Reading

1. Safety is a major theme throughout the novel. What kinds of safety (physical, psychological, etc.) are the characters seeking? How?
2. "History is written by the victors." How will the history of this revolution be written? Who are the victors? In a broader sense, what does this adage tell us about the way we view the past?
3. Assata recites lines from Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "Paul Robeson." (pp. 120–121) Read the entire poem and reflect on its meaning. Why do you think Assata chose those specific lines as a rallying cry? Do you know any other poems, songs, or works of art that have similar sentiments? Is there a piece of art you find motivational or inspirational? Why?
4. Emezi evokes vivid imagery in their novel. Create a visual representation of the angels or other characters.
5. What is the main theme of this book? Explain your thinking.
6. Do you think this story alludes to any real-world events? Discuss.



Praise for Akwaeke Emezi

**"We are so lucky to be living
at the same time that
Akwaeke Emezi is making work."**

—Out.com

**"One of contemporary literature's
most engrossing talents."**

—Elle.com

"A once-in-a-generation voice."

—Vulture

**"One of our
greatest living writers."**

—Shondaland

**"A dazzling literary talent
whose works cut to the quick
of the spiritual self."**

—Esquire

Praise for *Bitter*

★ **"The story introduces a space where queer characters from myriad faith traditions receive love and support from peers and adults in a world that is not perfect, but in which the people strive to create space for radical inclusion. A compact, urgent, and divine novel."**

—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

★ **"Emezi peoples this timely, urgently told first-person story with vivacious queer characters of color who have the agency to define the future for themselves and their city. Simultaneously brave, conscientious, and fearful, Bitter is all the more memorable for her complexity as Emezi illustrates in this steadfast volume the discipline of hope—like art, something to be worked at and practiced again and again."**

—Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

"Emezi's novel is mesmerizing from start to finish; their character's voices are distinct, and the author continually reminds the reader that it is the children who must assume leadership positions and battle the city-protected corruption that threatens the everyday people. This stirring novel will undoubtedly sit with readers long after the last sentence."

—Booklist



Praise for *Pet*

A National Book Award Finalist

A Walter Award Honor Book

A Stonewall Award Honor

A *New York Times* Best Book of the Year

A *Time* Best Book of the Year

An NPR Favorite Book of the Year

A *School Library Journal*
Best Book of the Year

A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year

A New York Public Library
Best Book of the Year

A *BuzzFeed* Best YA Book of the Year



“The word hype was invented to describe books like this.”

—Refinery29

“A unique science fiction tale.”

—Essence

“With great tenderness, *Pet* questions a society silenced by denial.”

—Observer

“A riveting and timely work answering the questions about how you go about the world when the world around you is in denial.”

—Out

★ **“An important narrative that teens will want to read to gain some perspective on the modern political environment.”**

—The Bulletin, Starred Review

★ **“This soaring novel shoots for the stars and explodes the sky with its bold brilliance.”**

—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

★ **“Emezi’s direct but tacit story of injustice, unconditional acceptance, and the evil perpetuated by humankind forms a compelling, nuanced tale that fans of speculative horror will quickly devour.”**

—Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

★ **“A riveting and important read that couldn’t be more well timed to our society’s struggles with its own monsters.”**

—School Library Journal, Starred Review

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Guide written by Professor Shanetia Clarke



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