

Reading Group Guide

1. At the beginning of *What's Mine and Yours*, Robbie Ventura tells Ray Gilbert to get property that no one will ever take away from his children, in order to build a legacy. What other legacies do the parents in this novel leave their children? What would you want to leave your loved ones?
2. The parents and children of *What's Mine and Yours* exist with a significant chasm between them. Discuss the ways that the Ventura daughters and Gee don't often see the motivations behind their parents' choices, nor the sacrifice, and how did it resonate with you and your own life?
3. When Inéz visits Noelle in Golden Brook, she's afraid that her friend is losing her sense of self while out in the suburbs, especially after hearing the story of a black woman and her son threatened with the police by a neighbor. How did you feel about the party's reaction to that story and Inéz's criticism of Noelle's silence?
4. There are many versions of caregiving in this novel that go beyond just parent and child. Discuss the ways that these characters are playing the role of mother for one another.
5. The two mothers in the novel, Lacey May and Jade, both wanted what was best for their children, regardless of how it's received by them and the broader implications of their actions. Do you believe Noelle and Gee ultimately reach an understanding as to why their mothers behaved how they did?
6. The town hall in which the school integration is discussed is set in 2002, yet this issue is still present today. How did this storyline relate to your understanding of the current school integration debate?
7. When Noelle, Margarita, and Diane come together in their search for Robbie, Noelle attempts to heal the rift between them, despite their fraught relationship. She tells Margarita, "I've been thinking. Our parents are always going to have their problems, but that doesn't mean we have to stay away from each other. We can be family on our own terms." Noelle is attempting to heal a long-standing wound. How do other characters in the book attempt to do the same with the people in their lives?

8. Noelle is labeled as white multiple times, most notably by Inéz and Ruth, which results in two different reactions in the moment. Why did Noelle's response vary in each instance? Have there been moments where you have not been seen in the way that you identify?
9. Identity politics is an important thread throughout this novel. Discuss the ways in which Diane has internalized some of Lacey May's prejudices. How does that affect her relationship with Alma?
10. Jade fights for her son's place in the world, wanting him to have more opportunities than she or Ray had. Discuss how this influences Gee and shapes what he expects from the world and other people.
11. This novel is filled with mostly fraught relationships that ultimately show the depth and complexities of love. Was there a particular relationship in the novel that spoke to you the most? Did it remind you of a relationship in your own life?
12. When Noelle and Ruth speak about Lacey May's acceptance of Alma, Noelle comments, "It's not the same as being black." Discuss what Noelle means by this.
13. By the final scenes at the wedding, it appears that Noelle has reconciled with her family. Yet she grapples with their limitations and the way they can progress in certain ways, accept some things but not others. Discuss what is meant by the line, "They'd never admit how willingly they'd played their parts."

Discussion with Naima Coster

What inspired you to write *What's Mine and Yours*?

I knew that I wanted to write a novel about the integration of a public high school. I was deeply moved by the reporting of Nikole Hannah-Jones. I first encountered her work on *This American Life* where she covered an integration program in Missouri, in the school district where Michael Brown graduated from high school. The episode, "The Problem We All Live With," included audio footage of white parents at a community meeting opposing the admission of black students. I was haunted by the things the parents said, the riotous applause.

I wondered about the black children sitting in that auditorium. I wondered about the opportunities that would open up for them, as well as the hardships and experiences that would leave a mark. When I was a girl, I participated in an education program that led me to a privileged, largely white school. It changed the trajectory of my life, but it was also hard, and that time is still with me. From there, I started to imagine Central and the story of Gee and Noelle.

The novel is made of intricate layers that build on each other. Was there a moment where all of these disparate strands and characters finally came together, or did the shape of the narrative come to you fully formed?

The book started with Lacey May, although I didn't realize it was a book at the time. During my first winter living in North Carolina, I was snowed in for three days in our little house at the bottom of a gravel road. We kept the heat on low to save money because we hadn't anticipated how expensive it would be to fill the tank with propane. I was stranded and lonely and very cold. Over those three days, I wrote a short story called "Cold" about a woman named Lacey May who needs to find a way to keep the gas on for her girls.

When I started dreaming about *What's Mine and Yours* and the drama at the high school, I thought about bringing Lacey May and her family into the landscape of the novel. The notion that a mother would do nearly anything to protect her family is so often considered heroic. But it's also an insidious idea—that any choice or action is defensible if it's done to secure a good life for one's children. All manner of harms have been done in this country to black and brown families under the guise of keeping the futures of white children safe.

Were there characters that you understood and could write easily, and any that took longer to reveal themselves?

The mothers in this book came readily to me—Jade, Lacey May, Noelle. As a writer, I'm obsessed with motherhood, the way it bestows a new identity while also taking away a former sense of self. This book picks up that early obsession that dominated my first novel, *Halsey Street*, and takes it further. And I became a mother as I worked on *What's Mine and Yours*.

The hardest character for me to crack was Gee. At first, I thought it was because he was so different from me: a teenage boy growing up in North Carolina. But this wasn't the case at

all. It took me a long time to recognize that Gee was actually unnervingly close to me; he held so many difficult and familiar experiences and emotions. I was resistant to looking inside him because it would require looking further into myself, my family history. I'm thinking about his attempts to bury loss and violence, a pain so deep it seems to have the power to destroy us. I'm thinking about the strength it takes to live on after trauma, and the desire to leave behind the past so that we can inhabit a much brighter future. I'm thinking about how we can't ever quite drop the load we're carrying. And yet, even if we're so heavily burdened, we manage to build lives—however delicate, however fraught—beyond our wildest imaginings. For me, Gee is the heart of this book.

Did you learn something new about yourself during the process of writing this novel?

This book was so much fun to write. It reminded me that I write not only for what books do for readers and for the public imagination but also because I love to do it. There were so many characters who I got to be so very close to, and there's such pleasure in that access. Fiction can give us that sense of intimacy that we long for in our lives because so often the people closest to us can be unknowable. Fiction lets us into that mystery of other people and ourselves.

This novel has a significant amount of empathy for all of its characters, even the ones that are difficult to like or you disagree with their world view. As a writer, how do you maintain this for a character, especially when they're behaving at their worst?

We all contain multitudes, and as a fiction writer I try to express that reality in my work. Someone like Lacey May, for instance, is a fierce advocate for her daughters; she is also racist. Both things are true. They don't cancel each other out or redeem her. I've never gotten caught up much in whether my characters are likable, which seems to be code for whether they're "good" people. I'm not sure I believe in the idea of good people or find it useful. If you know anyone long enough, you'll begin to see the discrepancies between who they say they are and who they actually are. I think we find the same is true for ourselves if we take an honest look at our lives.

As a fiction writer, I'm not interested in writing paragons of virtue or monsters; I'm much more interested in the full range of our humanity, the ways we long for and chase after

the things we need to survive. It helps that I write close to characters' perspectives. When we're in someone's mind, we can see the acrobatics, the distortions, and desires that drive them to behave so badly. It doesn't excuse what they do, but there's usually something recognizable in those impulses and longings, however misguided.

***What's Mine and Yours* takes place in various cities and towns in the U.S. Do you have a connection to these areas in the United States?**

In my early thirties, I lived in Durham, North Carolina, and my time there was so formative. While I lived in Durham, I worked in Winston-Salem, and I often traveled to the coast and to the mountains. During those years, I was sorting through questions about marriage and motherhood, social mobility and white supremacy, complicated racial dynamics within mixed families. I was also thinking about race and belonging in my new context, how different it felt to be myself in North Carolina versus New York City. Those preoccupations became the stuff of the novel.

And while the book isn't explicitly set in Durham, I was certainly inspired by the city. I hope the novel reads somewhat like a love letter. It's certainly a love letter to those years that I was sifting through those questions and feelings while driving on I-85, hiking the Eno River State Park, working with high school and college students, and finding community in Durham.

Were there any major changes to plot or characters between your first draft and the novel now?

I had lots of different ideas about how the drama at the high school should play out—I imagined a fire, an incident at a party, an assault in the woods. But what ultimately felt right was for there to be an incident in the school itself directly involving Gee, just as he begins to come into his own and forge a connection with Noelle. That's what happens with incidents of violence—they interrupt a life already in progress, a set of dreams and goals and promise, sometimes irreparably. Thankfully, that's not what happens to Gee—he's assaulted, but he comes back. That was important for me.

Who are some of your favorite writers and did they influence the way you wrote *What's Mine and Yours*?

There were three books that I turned to as I wrote *What's Mine and Yours*, all by authors I've long admired. *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward is one of my favorite books for its gorgeous rendering of home and the way it forms us. It's a tender, powerful look into the consciousness of the young girl who narrates it. I reread it mostly to marvel and feel inspired at how a book can bring us so deeply into character, place, and family. I also reread *The Dew Breaker* by Edwidge Danticat to help me see how a nonlinear book with multiple points of view could hold together. It's a beautiful book that's also very much about place. And I reread *Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante, which is so feral and charged with emotion. I can err on the side of restraint or poise on and off the page, and it's a book that shows what it's like when a character—and a writer—really let loose.

What advice would you give to other writers?

I know self-care is a big buzzword, and we often use it to mean manicures and fresh-squeezed juices, other signifiers of the good life. But when I think of self-care, I think about giving myself experiences that help me feel powerful in a world arranged to make a woman like me feel small, unimportant, or wrong. I think all writers need to take very good care of themselves, especially writers whose life experiences or social position have pushed them to feel they don't have a right to make art, to speak to the culture and intervene. It takes endurance and a sense of permission or authority to write. If I don't take care of myself, I can't hold on to either. Therapy has helped me tremendously. Surrounding myself with other writers has been important, too. There's encouragement and reassurance in relationships with other people who believe putting words to paper is a good way to spend a life. I've needed that. I need it still.