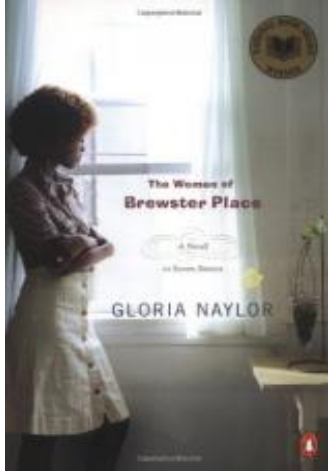


The Women of Brewster Place

by Gloria Naylor



About the Book

"Gloria just gets smoother and better, doesn't she? **The Men of Brewster Place** is sort of like a clear, cool mountain stream; too cold to wade in; too swift to dare take a drink from; yet clear and inviting nonetheless: sort of like black men. 'Difficult and dangerous; delicate and deep,' in the words of James Baldwin. Maybe more like a winter day with that clear blue sky and though the sun is shining we know we need protection before going out. A natural precaution that in no way spoils the adventure; that, indeed, allows us to interact with varying phenomena. I'm so glad to know what happened to Basil and why he didn't return. Ben needed to tell his story. C. C. Baker has reason for rage albeit misplaced. The men are standing on the mountain top looking over into the valley. They, too, have dreams that are being deferred, no, destroyed. Gloria was very brave to once again follow this trail into the uncharted territory of the heart." -- Nikki Giovanni

Dear Reader,

"Two or three things I know for sure: and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love."
--Dorothy Allison

Fifteen years ago I wrote **The Women of Brewster Place** and whenever I traveled and spoke publicly about the book, I inevitably got the question, "Where are the men?" This always struck me as curious since I thought the title of the novel was self-evident. But what people were really asking was, where is the rest of the story? Or should I say, the other side of the story. It has taken me these many years to decide finally that I wanted to give the men who had appeared briefly in *The Women* a voice of their own. Like many in this country I was profoundly moved by the Million Man March and the images of all those black men calling themselves to task, promising to return home and be better citizens by concentrating on being better fathers and brothers. The march provided an alternative to the popular media image of the troubled black man. In **The Men of Brewster Place**, the women are still present, but they take a back seat as I look at these men in all their complexity, and in their relationships to their families, their community. But above all, I wrote *The*

Men of Brewster Place as a testament to the hidden majority, men like my father who worked hard all of their lives, who struggled to keep their homes together against incredible odds and who remained even after their deaths unsung, unknown.

Discussion Guide

The Men of Brewster Place

1. How would you describe Ben's role in this novel? What insights does he bring to each man's story? Why do you think Naylor resurrected his character?
2. What does Ben mean when he says, "We all live inside?" How is he, among the rest of the men featured in the novel, singularly able to make that statement?
3. Like Ben, Brother Jerome serves a universal function in the novel; although we don't discover much about his character, how does his story pave the way for the rest of the stories in the novel? What do his genius and his mental deficiency represent?
4. On the whole, do you feel sympathetically toward the men in this novel and their particular plights? To what extent are they responsible for their misfortunes, and to what extent are they the victims of social bias?
5. Two of the novel's most disparate characters are Moreland T. Woods and C. C. Baker, yet each man is responsible for hurting many people. How do they represent both ends of the spectrum of the black male experience? How do their respective dreams of greatness get in the way of becoming truly great?
6. The climax of the novel takes place in Max's barber shop, a place where "the men who sit . . . done solved every problem in the world before the shop closes each day." Why do you think Naylor chose it as the setting for Greasy's violent death? What importance does his death carry in relation to the lives of the other characters?
7. Ben claims that, "although a man grieves different from a woman, a whole lot more is kept inside to bite him a little here, a little there, until the blood begins to flow." How do the men of Brewster Place manage their grief? Is there a "better" way to grieve?

The Women of Brewster Place

8. What do you think of the novel's structure? How does each woman's individual voice reinforce the novel's themes as a whole? Does this group of women represent a cross section of women in general?
9. In what sorts of ways do each of these women find comfort in the hardships of their everyday lives? How does this reflect the strengths and weaknesses of each woman?

10. Each of these women cope with enormous loss in their lives, but each manages their grief differently. Compare, for instance, Mattie's loss of her house and her son with Ceil's loss of her baby. What could these women learn from each other?

11. How does Naylor portray the South, where many of these women came from, as both a land of plenty and a land of harsh deprivation? How are these women's lives different living in the North--are they happier? more fulfilled? more subject to racial bias? Is there more opportunity for them in Brewster Place than in the South?

12. What do you think of the way Lorraine and Theresa are treated by the other women in Brewster Place? What is Naylor saying about prejudice? Why do you think she concluded the novel with their story?

13. Each of these women is capable of enormous love, but they are often hurt by their loved ones. What do you think Naylor is saying about a woman's capacity for love? Is this sort of love "worth it"? Would these women be happier if they had hardened their hearts to those who eventually let them down?

14. What do you think the "death" of Brewster Place means for the future of its residents? How does Brewster Place continue to live on, once it is vacant? What do you make of Mattie Michael's dream, in which the women of Brewster Place dismantle the structure, brick by brick?

Pertaining to both novels:

15. Compare the endings of both novels. Does one ending feel more hopeful than the other? Considering that both novels end at the same time historically, yet were written fifteen years apart, how do you think the events of the last fifteen years affected Naylor's perspective on her characters' futures? Do you perceive a change in outlook in her writing?

16. Which of the male characters' stories surprised you, and why? Has knowing their "sides" of their stories changed the way you feel about them?

17. The epilogues of each novel, both quoting Langston Hughes, refer to "a dream deferred." What does this phrase signify in the lives of Brewster Place's men and women individually? How, in general, do the experiences of the women differ from that of the men? How are they similar?

Author Bio

Gloria Naylor was born in 1950 in New York City. Her father, Roosevelt Naylor, a transit worker, and her mother, Alberta Naylor, a telephone operator, immigrated north from rural Mississippi the year before Gloria's birth. From an early age Gloria was an avid reader, a passion she inherited from her mother, who used to go to great lengths to buy books she could not otherwise get from the Mississippi libraries because blacks were not allowed inside. Gloria was a shy and introverted child, but she found expression in a diary she kept as a young girl. This affinity for the written word continued throughout high school, where she was introduced to the English classics and where her own writing earned her praise and high marks from her teachers.

The year Gloria graduated from high school, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The shock of

this event compelled Gloria to postpone college. She chose instead to become a Jehovah's Witness missionary, and for the next seven years she traveled the country evangelizing. At age twenty-five she abandoned this effort and resumed her education, enrolling at Brooklyn College. There she experienced an awakening of sorts, realizing for the first time the importance of her identity as both a woman and a black American. She was introduced to some of the great black women writers, and this fueled her passion to produce her own work.

Naylor's early attempts at writing were hugely successful. One of her first short stories was published in *Essence* magazine, and soon after she negotiated a book contract. Published in 1982, that novel, **The Women of Brewster Place**, was an immediate success, earning her great critical praise as well as the National Book Award for the year's best first novel. From there, Naylor went on to publish **Linden Hills** (1985), **Mama Day**(1987), and **Bailey's Cafe** (1992). Each of these novels garnered much attention for their exploration of the modern black American experience.

In addition to her novels, Naylor has written essays and screenplays, as well as the stage adaptation of **Bailey's Cafe**. **The Women of Brewster Place** was made into a television movie starring Oprah Winfrey, who is an ardent fan of the novel and the writer. Naylor herself is the founder of One Way Productions, an independent film company, and is also involved in a literacy program in the Bronx. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including fellowships from both the NEA and the Guggenheim Foundation, and frequently serves as a lecturer and visiting professor at universities across the country.

Critical Praise

"Gloria Naylor brings an ability to look into the mirror of souls that reflect black experience and to extract richly crafted characterizations that are prototypes rather than stereotypes. Instinctively, we know these people. "

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