

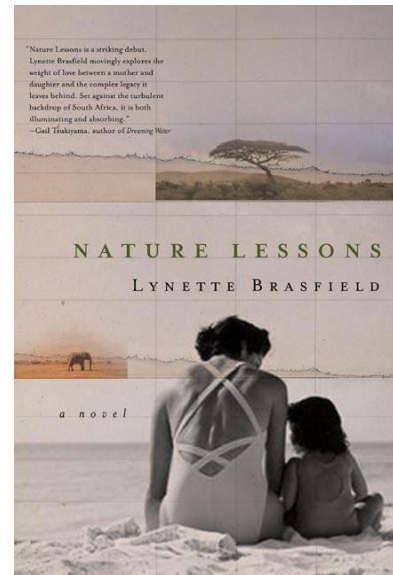
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Nature Lessons*

*By Lynette Brasfield*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Nature Lessons* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Nature Lessons*.

### About the Book

Set against the backdrop of South Africa's troubled history and natural beauty, *Nature Lessons: A Novel* — part fictional memoir and part murder mystery — tells the story of Kate Jensen's reluctant return home to find her missing mother, who claims in a letter to have been kidnapped by her brother-in-law—the man she believes responsible for her husband's death three decades earlier. This absorbing novel, rich in imagery drawn from nature and Zulu folklore, weaves back and forth in time as Kate, first as a young girl, and then as an adult, slowly peels back layers of truth about her white family's history during the apartheid era, her father's death, and her mother's seeming paranoia.

Though its subject matter can be searing, *Nature Lessons* is ultimately a hopeful story, laced with wry humor, about the enduring nature of family bonds even under the most difficult of circumstances.



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## About the Author

**Lynette Brashfield** was born in Durban, South Africa, and moved to the United States in 1985. She's worked as a journalist, toy salesperson, assistant librarian, high school teacher, and public relations executive. She now lives in Southern California with her husband and two sons.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the novel is entitled *Nature Lessons*?
2. "What you see depends on who you are," says one of the characters, Prudence Tshabalala. Discuss how the varying cultural, historical, and educational backgrounds of the characters in the novel lead them to see the world, political systems, and even natural phenomena in different ways. How does Prudence's statement relate to the mother's beliefs, paranoid and otherwise, about "The Plot" against the family and Oom Piet's role in "The Plot"?
3. Kate struggles with issues of responsibility and guilt, wondering how much individuals owe to a troubled parent and/or a troubled country. In her position—as a young white woman during the apartheid era, and as the daughter of a possibly mentally ill woman—what might your choices have been, and why?
4. How do Violet's relationships with Kate's father and Winston impact both her independence and growing paranoia?
5. What do you think really happened between Oom Piet, Kate's father, and Winston?
6. Discuss how the stars and the moon serve as powerful metaphors for perception and renewal in Kate's life.
7. In the end, Kate contemplates her "younger self." How do Kate's childhood voice and adult voice merge at the end of the novel? Why do you think the author structured the novel this way?
8. "The Three Fiances. It sounded like a bad movie. Or a singing trio," Kate says early in the novel. What impact did Kate's childhood have on her romantic relationships? Do you think Kate and Simon have a future together?
9. Has this novel improved your understanding of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa? And mental illness? In what ways?

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