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Discussion Guide

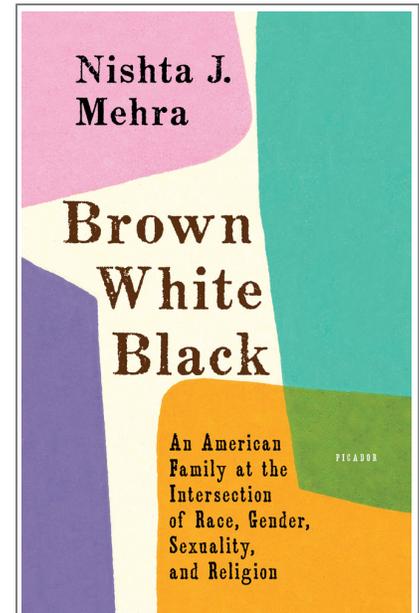
Brown White Black

by Nishta J. Mehra

Intimate and honest essays on motherhood, marriage, love, and acceptance

ABOUT THE BOOK

"A stirring portrait...Touching on issues of race, gender, sexuality, parenthood, marriage, and love, [*Brown White Black* is] a timely book of essays that challenges readers to examine their own understanding of identity and family."—*Bustle*



ISBN: 9781250133557

Brown White Black is a portrait of Nishta J. Mehra's family: her wife, who is white; her adopted child, Shiv, who is black; and their experiences dealing with America's rigid ideas of race, gender, and sexuality. Her clear-eyed and incisive writing on her family's daily struggle to make space for themselves amid racial intolerance and stereotypes personalizes some of America's most fraught issues. Mehra writes candidly about her efforts to protect and shelter Shiv from racial slurs on the playground and from intrusive questions by strangers while educating her child on the realities and dangers of being black in America. In other essays, she discusses growing up in the racially polarized city of Memphis; coming out as queer; being an adoptive mother who is brown; and what it's like to be constantly confronted by people's confusion, concern, and expectations about her child and her family. Above all, Mehra argues passionately for a more nuanced and compassionate understanding of identity and family.

Both poignant and challenging, *Brown White Black* is a remarkable portrait of a loving family on the front lines of some of the most highly charged conversations in our culture.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Brown White Black* opens with Nishta making a choice at a coffeeshop. Each time, no matter how it is misspelled, she proudly says "Nishta" instead of giving her wife's name or making one up. Have you ever been in a situation where you considered giving a different name or changing an aspect of your identity because it was easier? Or, have you made the same choice Nishta did?
2. Nishta writes that "what people see when they look at us really has more to do with them than us, a Rorschach test of sorts." What do people see when they look at your family? What would you change about the way you see others?
3. In the essay *Working The Trap*, Nishta writes "Queerness isn't something you can put on or take off, not a magic kingdom you can visit for a day and then leave, taking your rainbow souvenir back home like some kind of trophy rewarding you for your open mind." What does queerness mean to you? Do you agree with Nishta?
4. In college, Nishta shaves her head. "A shaved head served as a kind of litmus test. At a time in my life when I was examining old friendships, sorting through which ones would last and which ones might not, people's responses to my hair were helpful data." What litmus tests do you have in your life?
5. Nishta writes candidly about "balancing the different parts of my identity - neither sentimental about nor ashamed of my Indianness, but also careful not to let it be the dominant feature by which I was known." What parts of your identity are held in balance? Is it challenging?
6. Nishta is candid about the difficulty of parenting. "I was completely unprepared for the way that our parenting choices, made inside of private, thoughtful conversations, would prove divisive to the point that it affected relationships with friends." Have you experienced this? Do you agree?
7. At the end of the essay *The Sin Of Our Security*, Nishta writes "Without suffering, there is no growth. I work to keep myself grounded in reality, so that I can raise a child who will thrive inside of it." What do you do to grow and to stay grounded? Do you agree with Nishta?
8. In the essay *Raising Shiv*, Nishta writes "Telling a small child the truth about the ugliness in the world is a very unpleasant task, and we Americans tend to opt for a lot of erasing instead." Do you agree? If so, what are some examples?
9. In the essay *Making Space*, Nishta writes "Being a nontraditional family means constantly navigating and questioning public perceptions and stereotypes while also being occupied with the same mundane tasks and activities as every other family..." What kind of family are you a part of or do you hope to have?
10. In the essay *Pretending To Be White*, Nishta writes "Even though I lived inside of a white world, I was well aware that I was a visitor inside of it, granted a visa that could be revoked at any time." What type of experience have you had with race?
11. In the essay (Not) *Passing*, Nishta writes movingly about Shiv's exploration of gender and choosing to self-identify with the pronouns she/her. How do you feel about self-identification? Does it have a presence in your home or work life?
12. At the end of *Brown White Black*, Nishta writes "To ask what matters to others, and to then demonstrate a willingness to take on the answer as our own concern, is a form of generosity I believe we can all cultivate." What are ways in which you are striving to do this?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NISHTA J. MEHRA was raised among a tight-knit network of Indian immigrants in Memphis, Tennessee. She is the proud graduate of St. Mary's Episcopal School and holds a B.A. in Religious Studies from Rice University and an M.F.A in Creative Writing from the University of Arizona. An English teacher with over a decade of experience in middle and high school classrooms, she lives with her wife, Jill, and their child, Shiv, in Phoenix.

She is the author of *The Pomegranate King*, a collection of essays.



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