



PLEASE NOTE: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of this book. If you have not finished reading *The Three Mothers* by Anna Malaika Tubbs, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

The Three Mothers

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reflecting on the reasons why she decided to explore Berdis's, Louise's, and Alberta's stories, Anna writes, "Their lives did not begin with motherhood; on the contrary, long before their sons were even thoughts in their minds, each woman had her own passions, dreams, and identity. Each woman was already living an incredible life that her children would one day follow" (p. 6). In what ways have you noticed society's normalization of ignoring a woman's identity outside of motherhood? Of all the mothers in history, why do you think the author chose to write about Alberta, Berdis, and Louise?
2. Alberta, Berdis, and Louise are intentionally called by their first names in this book, as opposed to Ms. King, Ms. Baldwin, and Ms. Little, respectively. Why? What does this do for the narrative that may have been missed otherwise?
3. Anna describes how Black women's contributions are disregarded to an unquantifiable extent (pp. 4–5). In what ways do you think this dehumanizes Black women?
4. Each chapter opens with two quotes that are different from what readers may expect and often oppose each other. Why do you think the author made this choice? How did it influence your experience reading each chapter?
5. When talking about Black women and how they've survived oppressive forces, Anna writes, "Erasure, misrecognition, and historical amnesia have certainly contributed to the formation of our identity as Black women, but our fight against such forces

with our affirmation and recognition of ourselves and each other has been much more telling” (p. 6). How did each of the three women’s perceptions of self enable them to create strong foundations in their lives and their sons’ lives when facing oppression and systemic racism? How can we work toward a world where Black women’s perceptions of self are validated by the greater society?

6. Anna reflects on September 22, a day when mobs of white men and boys retaliated against the budding Black upper class. She mentions how Black communities have always responded with resilience, writing, “The Black community as a whole has never been influenced solely by the actions done to it but instead continued to grow in its incredible fight to persevere despite such actions” (p. 28). In what ways do you see this sentiment ring true right now? How does that kind of strength continue to inspire?
7. Anna mentions “respectability politics” and how Black women were expected to be polished so that they could “combat demeaning representations of [their] people” (p. 31). How do respectability politics still play a role today?
8. While discussing the kind of media representation Berdis and other Black children were exposed to, Anna writes, “The presentation and popularization of the pickaninny served to objectify Black children as worthless and Black parents as inept” (p. 54). How do you think this kind of representation affected Black families, both mentally and physically? Reflect on how much media representation has reformed throughout the years. How has it improved? What do you think can still be improved?
9. After reflecting on Alberta and Michael King’s love story, Anna mentions how “Black unions have been targeted and disrupted as a strategy to uphold white supremacy. . . . The lack of environmental support for Black marriages and families has made them both fragile and precious” (p. 71). Do you think Black marriages are still targeted today as a means to uphold white supremacy? How might one fight against such factors and beat those odds? What can people outside of Black couples do so that Black marriages are less targeted?



- 
- 
- 
10. As Anna segues into the topic of motherhood, she writes, “Like Black marriage, Black parenthood—specifically Black motherhood—is both awe-inspiring and extremely vulnerable....When the country is suffering from the effects of war, economic loss, health crises, or social upheaval, the most disadvantaged groups experience the most misfortune” (p. 83). How do we continue to see Black mothers disproportionately get the short end of the stick today? What elements of this system need to change so that Black parents can thrive?
 11. In her discussion of motherhood, Anna mentions how close Alberta, Louise, and Berdis were to their sons. How are these three women similar to their sons, and how are they different?
 12. Anna mentions how, after the Civil War, Black women were often attacked for having kids and regarded as “welfare queens,” which was a “derogatory term used to imply that some women had children simply to receive the benefits of welfare” (p. 95). How do these images popularized by white supremacy continue to affect Black mothers and the perception of Black mothers today?
 13. Throughout the twentieth century, the United States performed forced eugenic sterilizations on Black and poor women (p. 95). How do you see this history continue today? Anna brings up how many Black people who live with a mental illness fear what might happen if they call for help, especially because of the numerous cases of Black people with mental illness being imprisoned or killed by the very people they called to help them (p. 114). How does this affect the ways in which Black families handle mental health today? How do the women at the center of this book illustrate the pain of generational trauma as well as the power of generational knowledge?
 14. As Anna discusses the ways in which Black people fought for their basic human rights in the South, we learn that Black women like Alberta were active members at the forefront of organizations like NAACP (p. 110). How do we actively prioritize the stories of men at the forefront of these movements, as opposed to women, and in what ways can we elevate the stories of women so that others are not forgotten as Louise, Berdis, and Alberta have been?



15. Early in the book, Anna mentions wondering what it would be like if she could sit down with Berdis, Louise, and Alberta, and what questions she would ask them (p. 14). If you could sit down with these three mothers, what would you ask them?
16. In the conclusion, Anna writes about the immense pressure placed upon Black women and says, “While there is more of an effort to acknowledge such heroines in our community and to revere them for their strength, the world has grown far too accustomed to accepting that it is some kind of inevitable burden for Black women to carry” (p. 213). How do you think society can move past the dated stereotype that Black women must be tough no matter what struggles head their way? How can we alleviate the burdens of resilience and strength at all costs that are too often placed on Black women?
17. After reading *The Three Mothers* and learning about Berdis’s, Louise’s, and Alberta’s stories as women, in what ways can you say that these women heavily influenced the paths their sons went on? Do you think they would have followed different paths without the foundations their mothers laid for them?
18. *The Three Mothers* is a historical biography and an American history lesson through the perspective of three Black women. How does our collective understanding of past events change when considering things from Alberta’s, Berdis’s, and Louise’s vantage points? How does the book also offer a guide for the current issues we are facing as a nation and a world?
19. The book states that the storyteller influences the story. What is the significance of seeking more hidden histories and stories told by members of oppressed and marginalized communities? How might this change how we view events both past and present?

