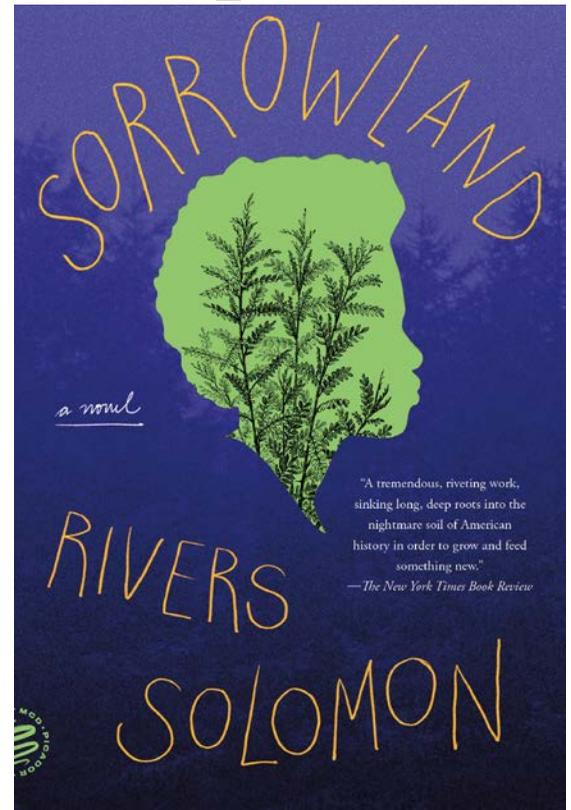


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

Sorrowland

by Rivers Solomon



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Vern—seven months pregnant and desperate to escape the strict religious compound where she was raised—flees for the shelter of the woods. There, she gives birth to twins and plans to raise them far from the influence of the outside world.

But even in the forest, Vern is a hunted woman. Forced to fight back against the community that refuses to let her go, she unleashes incredible brutality far beyond what a person should be capable of, her body wracked by inexplicable and uncanny changes.

To understand her metamorphosis and to protect her small family, Vern has to face the past and, more troublingly, the future—outside the woods. Finding the truth will mean uncovering not only the secrets of the compound she fled but also the violent history of America that produced it.

Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* is a genre-bending work of gothic fiction. Here, monsters aren't just individuals but entire nations. This is a searing, seminal book that marks the arrival of a bold, unignorable voice in American fiction.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When we first encounter Vern, she's alone in the woods and giving birth to Howling and Feral. The wilderness that surrounds her is a perilous place, yet Vern prefers such overt dangers to Cainland and "the covert violence of life beyond the trees" (page 4). Discuss how this passage sets the stage for *Sorrowland*. What does it tell you about the Blessed Acres of Cain, about Vern, and about the world in which she and her children live?
2. Vern proudly defies convention and superficial constructs. She's "wild through and through" (page 9) and believes it "better not to belong at all than belong in a cage" (page 8). Consider the many factors that make Vern the unique person she is. When does she draw strength from her singular characteristics? When is she made vulnerable by them?
3. The Blessed Acres of Cain began as a Black nationalist group focused on survivalism, self-reliance, and "education as a tool of liberation" (page 10). Discuss the origins of the Cainland community. What prompted its founding? What did it aspire to be? What did it end up becoming under the control of Eamon Fields and Sherman?
4. In a heated phone call with her mother, Vern makes it clear that she won't be returning to Cainland and letting her children "anywhere near the likes of Sherman" (page 56). Ruthanne's position, meanwhile, is far less straightforward: "I can't click my heels together and be somewhere else," she says, "because there is nowhere else . . . I can't just leave" (page 55). Discuss Vern's motivations for breaking free from the Blessed Acres. Contrast this with Ruthanne's reasons for staying. Where do your sympathies lie?
5. On page 93, Vern tells a haunting tale to Howling and Feral: the fable of Brother Jon. Discuss this story within a story. How does it amplify *Sorrowland*'s key themes of race, identity, subjugation, and transformation? In what ways does it speak to real-life legacies of colonialism, displacement, and state-sanctioned brutality against Black communities?
6. As Vern prepares to leave the woods and guide her children into the outside world, she tells Feral that together they're like the triple-star system Polaris: "Three stars in orbit with each other . . . All joined up. Like you, me, and Howling. Bound" (page 118). Discuss the remarkable bond shared by Vern, Howling, and Feral. In what ways do Howling and Feral take after Vern? In what ways do they resemble Sherman? In what ways are Howling and Feral their own extraordinary beings?
7. When Vern and her children finally emerge from the forest, they encounter an electric world of bright lights, fast cars, and fried foods. Reflect on what they see and whom they meet. In what ways do their experiences confirm Sherman's warnings about the outside world as a place "of filth and contradiction, poison and lies" (page 5)? In what ways do their experiences contradict Sherman's dire depiction?
8. Vern undergoes an extraordinary transformation over the course of *Sorrowland*, one that's both frightening and empowering. At certain points, Vern's passenger is invasive, like a "creature

Reading Group Gold

inside her, lurking, trying to bust through her bones” (page 138); at other points, it’s a source of strength and endurance that brings her “as close to invincible as a living being [can get]” (page 210). Discuss Vern’s metamorphosis, her supernatural gifts, and the intense hauntings she experiences. When do her powers help her? When do they threaten to overwhelm her?

9. Gogo believes that “what people need to live is other people” (page 255). Vern, meanwhile, is wary of a world that includes folks like Ollie, Sherman, and Eamon Fields. Discuss the deepening relationship that Vern and Gogo share. Where do their hearts meet? Where do they diverge?
10. As Vern and Gogo race back to Cainland to rescue the Cainites, Vern expects “fear to set in, but [feels] only anticipation” (page 331). Then the poetry of Langston Hughes echoes through her mind, and she knows she’s “not alone.” Who do you think is with Vern at this critical moment?
11. Reflect on Vern’s identity as a mother to Howling and Feral. In what ways does it change over the course of the novel? What other forms of motherhood—both conventional and radical, destructive and protective—do you see in *Sorrowland*?
12. Discuss the power dynamic between Ollie and Queen and the circumstances that led to Barbara James’s transformation into an otherworldly being “tethered to a leash made of trauma and pain” (page 335). In what ways does Ollie control Queen? When is Queen in control? What does Vern see when she looks upon Queen?
13. Discuss your reaction to Ollie’s disclosure that she was an “essential asset” (page 316) in the human experimentations at Cainland. How do her actions mirror historical atrocities like the Tuskegee studies and the experiments of James Marion Sims?
14. Chapter 26 offers a sweeping look at the life of Ruthanne Josephine Nicolette Riley, from her bohemian youth and relationship with Andre Wilder to the birth of Vern and their fateful relocation to the Blessed Acres. Does witnessing Ruthanne’s life story change your understanding of her character? Do you think it changes Vern’s?
15. Discuss *Sorrowland*’s climactic final scenes. What motivates Vern to save the community and people she once rejected? What do you make of the fact that it takes Vern’s supernatural gifts and Gogo’s medical expertise to bring the Cainites back to life?

Reading Group Gold

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. *Sorrowland* is rich with literary references, from the poetry of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. Choose one of these texts for your next book club gathering. How does your reading experience enhance your understanding of *Sorrowland*?
2. America's legacy of genocide and dislocation is central to *Sorrowland*. "You can't own land," Howling tells us. "The land is kin and trying to own it is like trying to own a person" (page 94). For your next book club gathering, research the history of displacement and stolen land in your region, your city, or your neighborhood. Share what you learn. Who originally stewarded the ground beneath your feet? Why are they no longer there? How do these questions reverberate throughout *Sorrowland*?
3. "I like the woods," says Vern. "In them, the possibilities seem endless. They are where wild things are, and I like to think the wild always wins" (page 354). The natural world flows through *Sorrowland* and nourishes Vern's soul, from the towering majesty of the trees to the grand underground kingdom of the mycelia. For your next book club gathering, embark on an outing that brings you close to nature. Options include joining up with local foragers, signing up for a mushroom walk led by a mycologist, or quieting your mind in a neighborhood park. Share your experiences reconnecting with the land and communing with a wildness that "turns sorrows into flowers."

Discussion guide by Matthew Thompson