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Reading Group Gold

Disgruntled

A Novel

by Asali Solomon

ABOUT THE BOOK

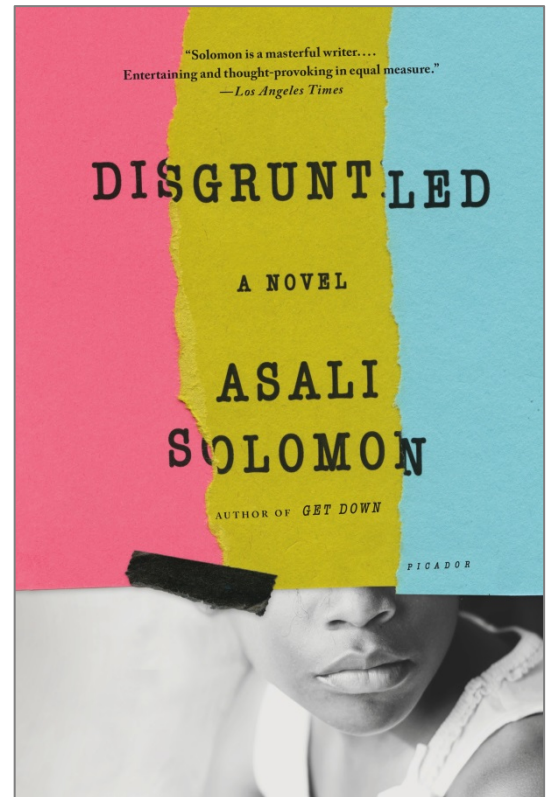
Kenya Curtis is only eight years old, but she knows that she's different, even if she can't put her finger on how or why. It's not because she's black—most of the other students in the fourth-grade class at her West Philadelphia elementary school are too. Maybe it's because she celebrates Kwanzaa, or because she's forbidden from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Maybe it's because she calls her father—a housepainter-slash-philosopher—"Baba" instead of "Daddy," or because her parents' friends gather to pour out libations "from the Creator, for the Martyrs" and discuss "the community."

Kenya does know that it's connected to what her Baba calls "the shame of being alive"—a shame that only grows deeper and more complex over the course of Asali Solomon's long-awaited debut novel. *Disgruntled*, effortlessly funny and achingly poignant, follows Kenya from West Philadelphia to the suburbs, from public school to private, from childhood through adolescence, as she grows increasingly disgruntled by her inability to find any place or thing or person that feels like home.

A coming-of-age tale, a portrait of Philadelphia in the late eighties and early nineties, an examination of the impossible double-binds of race, *Disgruntled* is a novel about the desire to rise above the limitations of the narratives we're given and the painful struggle to craft fresh ones we can call our own.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Disgruntled* is told from the close third-person perspective of Kenya Curtis. What are the advantages of this perspective, and why do you think Asali Solomon chose this point of view rather than first person?
2. The novel opens in 1980s West Philadelphia, a time and place rife with racial conflict. Solomon expertly weaves true and catastrophic events into the novel, such as the Philadelphia police's bombing of MOVE's compound. What do real life events such as this one add to the novel?



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3. During one of the meetings of the “Seven Days,” Kenya’s father, Johnbrown, expresses disapproval when Cindalou dedicates her libation to Martin Luther King, Jr. Were you surprised at this? Do you agree or disagree with Johnbrown’s reasoning?
4. After Kenya learns that the parents of one of her schoolmates are possibly getting a divorce, she becomes terrified that the same thing might happen to her family. During one of her parents’ arguments, she says, “Just don’t get a divorce,” to which her father replies, “We can’t,” and both her parents laugh. How did this subtle foreshadowing affect your reading?
5. At one point during her parents’ biggest arguments--the one that ultimately leads to their divorce--Kenya realizes that “they had forgotten her” when her mother begins cursing. What does Kenya mean by this, and how does having a young girl as the novel’s chief protagonist influence the telling of the novel?
6. Before we learn the truth of what happened on the night that Kenya shot her mother, what did you think had happened?
7. When Kenya meets Devi, she finally feels as if she has a “best friend.” In Devi, she believes she’s met someone with whom she can share her deepest secrets, so she ends up telling Devi about how her stepfather tried to molest her. Why does Kenya finally feel close enough to someone to share this secret? And what do you think Solomon is trying to demonstrate through Devi’s character, who ends up betraying Kenya and later reappears toward the novel’s end?
8. Johnbrown’s letters from prison are largely excerpts from his philosophical novel, *The Key*. What do these changes in perspective and time achieve, and why do you think Solomon included these sections?
9. Throughout the novel, Kenya feels like an outsider because of her race and socioeconomic status. How does reading about these circumstances from the perspective of a child influence your understanding of them?
10. Solomon describes the skin color of many of the characters we encounter in the novel. Some are said to be “sand-colored,” others “reddish-brown,” and the handsome Commodore has skin that “*actually* looked like milk chocolate.” Why does Solomon describe skin color so explicitly?
11. When Commodore and Kenya are eating pizza together he tells her that she should pick off the pepperoni because he doesn’t “want to be responsible for Johnbrown’s daughter putting pork on her fork.” Why does Commodore feel so protective toward Kenya, and what does it say about Johnbrown that his beliefs still have a hold on Commodore all these years later?

12. Solomon cleverly uses humor throughout the novel to drive at points that most would find rather sad. For instance, when Kenya thinks back to a May Day performance at Lea School in which the students danced to “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now,” she remembers how humiliated she felt. Now, as a teen, Kenya finds the song depressing, especially because she realizes just how easy it would have been to stop the fifth graders as they shuffled to the right and left. What are some other instances in which Solomon uses humor? Why is humor such an effective device for getting to the deep and sometimes uncomfortable layers of human experience?
13. At the end of the novel, Kenya and her mother, Sheila, are back in the house where the novel opened and where Kenya grew up. Why does her mother choose to return to this house?
14. In the last scene of the novel, Kenya wakes from a dream of the butler from John Brown’s novel, *The Key*. He tells her, “You have to burn it all down.” What do you think he meant by this?

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