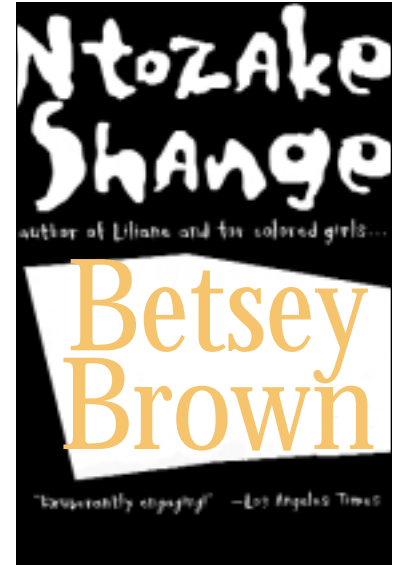


Betsey Brown

by Ntozake Shange

“A lyrical coming-of-age novel . . . about a teenaged black girl who endures the trials of school integration.”

— *The New York Times*



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Booklist,
Library Journal,
School Library
Journal, Kirkus,
VOYA

TO THE TEACHER

This is a unique and vividly told novel about a girl named Betsey Brown, an African American seventh-grader growing up in St. Louis, Missouri. In rendering a complete portrait of this girl, author Ntozake Shange also profiles her friends, her family, her home, her school, and her world. This world, though a work of fiction, is based closely and carefully on actual history, specifically on the nationwide school desegregation events of the Civil Rights movement in America's recent past. As such, *Betsey Brown* is a historical novel that will speak to, charm, move, and broaden the perspectives of readers both familiar with and unaware of America's domestic affairs of 1950s and 1960s.

Shange has set her story in the autumn of 1959, the year St. Louis started to desegregate its schools. In May of 1954, in its ruling on *Brown vs. Board of Education* of Topeka—a verdict now seen by many as the origin of the Civil Rights movement—the United States Supreme Court outlawed school segregation. The novel is firmly located in the wake of this landmark ruling; the plot of Shange's novel and the history of America's quest for integration during the Civil Rights era are fundamentally entwined. Thus textual references abound to the watershed events at Little Rock's Central High School in the September of 1957, for example, and to “fire-bombings and burning crosses” in the South (page 44) as well as “battalions of police and crowds of crackers” at a demonstration in St. Louis (page 159).

Betsey is the oldest child in a large, remarkable, and slightly eccentric African American family. Her father is a doctor who wakes his children each morning with point-blank questions about African history and Black culture while beating on a conga drum; her mother is a beautiful, refined, confident, and strong-willed social worker who is overwhelmed by the vast size of her young family and who cares very little for “all that nasty colored music.”

Indeed, Betsey’s whole existence can be seen as a perceptive, adventuresome, and still-developing hybrid of her parents’ most distinctive qualities. Her feelings of internal conflict are often clearer or easier to identify when seen as the collision of her father’s dreams and her mother’s manners, or her father’s music and her mother’s cosmetics. There are several fascinating characters in this novel—and encountering, describing, and trying to figure out these characters will appeal to students of all backgrounds—but the two characters who, after Betsey, most influence the directions, themes, and issues of this tale are Betsey’s mother and father, Jane and Greer. Their difficult marriage, like the difficult era of desegregation that has only begun in St. Louis and the rest of America, is the realistic, conflicted, yet ultimately hopeful backdrop before which Betsey’s lip-synching, poem-reciting, soul-searching, truth-seeking, tree-climbing, and fact-finding take place. In fact, Jane and Greer’s stubborn disagreements, heartfelt reconciliations, past glories, and future worries are all, at various times in the book, anchored or else set adrift by the activities of their eldest daughter (and first teenager!). Betsey’s running away sends her parents into a vicious fight, while her subsequent return seems to bring them closer together (if only temporarily).

Betsey’s own story, the main plot of this novel, unfolds straightforwardly, progressing from chapter to chapter in a manner as easy-to-read as it is compelling. It can be effectively taught to students in accordance with these chapters, covering the novel in a way that reflects its structure—in a series of sections. For the most part, the questions comprising the bulk of this teacher’s guide are arranged in an attempt to echo the novel’s structure. The “Questions on Comprehension” and “Questions for Class Discussion” are so phrased and offered in the hope that students will be able to think on their own, and then talk as a group, about the discoveries they made while reading this book. Such discoveries are the stuff of knowledge—or, as Carrie observes on page 188: ““Speak up Ike, ’spress yo’self.” That’s Dunbar, the colored American poet, I guess.”

As a novel, *Betsey Brown* is panoramic yet personal. It tells us what being a Black student in the early days of American desegregation was like by showing us what being Betsey Brown is like. This is an episodic, character-driven saga of the Black experience in St. Louis at the end of the “Fabulous Fifties,” but it is also a story about the many and various—and basically familiar—growing pains of a precocious, passionate, spunky young protagonist. We see Betsey fall in love; make friends; say prayers; argue with, look after, inspire, and ignore her younger siblings;

PRAISE FOR
BETSEY BROWN

run away from home; return to those who love and value her above all else; and switch from a school she knows and enjoys to a school on the other side of town where she is a minority and an outcast. We see Betsey outside the very door of her womanhood, we are told all about the steps and path that have brought her to this door, and we are left to wonder at what she will find beyond it.

“Ntozake Shange has re-created a humorous, charming, and heartbreaking vision of St. Louis and the Brown family that will delight young and old. She can conjure, as if by magic. . . . [This book] is like an enchanting melody.”—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“Miss Shange is a superb storyteller who keeps her eye on what brings her characters together rather than what separates them: courage and love, innocence and the loss of it, home and homelessness. [She] understands backyards, houses, schools, and churches. *Betsey Brown* rejoices in—but never sentimentalizes—those places on earth where you are accepted, where you are comfortable with yourself. . . . [This novel] creates a place that is both new and familiar, where both black and white readers will feel at home. The characters are so finely drawn they can be recognized by their speech alone. Readers of Miss Shange’s poetry already know that she has an extraordinary ear for the spoken word.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A beautiful, beautiful piece of writing.”—*Houston Post*

“Exuberantly engaging.”—*Los Angeles Times*

PREPARING
TO READ

Betsey Brown is a candid and engaging novel rich in the cultural, political, and historical realities of the African American experience. It is therefore ideally suited for those students eager to learn about this experience. However, a certain amount of familiarity with the major names and events of America’s Civil Rights struggle will assist any reader coming to this novel for the first time. Teachers should strive to make their students as familiar as possible in this regard, and the following facts and figures, though representative of the history that stands behind this novel, are mentioned only as starting points or introductory lessons.

As mentioned, the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, is a past event that strongly influences the outlooks and opinions of several of the characters in this novel—as well as the main themes of the novel itself. Even though most school districts in America attempted racial integration after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, some districts, mostly in the South,

tried to avoid desegregation. At the beginning of the 1957 school year, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, acting in obvious accordance with most of his predominantly white constituency, sent the state National Guard to block nine Black students from entering Little Rock's Central High School. President Eisenhower, in turn, sent army troops from the 101st Airborne Division to protect these nine students. Even with this federal protection, the "Little Rock Nine" were constantly jeered, teased, harassed, threatened, and spat upon by angry mobs, and a crisis—and national controversy—ensued. In spite of being nearly killed by angry spectators and violent onlookers on several occasions, eight of the nine students successfully completed the school year. The one student who did not finish the term, a girl named Minnijean Brown, had been suspended for fighting back against her white tormentors. Later, Governor Faubus temporarily closed all city high schools in Little Rock, but this strategy also ultimately failed. In 1959, the first-ever racially integrated class graduated from Central High School.

As a second example of the history to be uncovered and explored in the pages of *Betsey Brown*, the name of Emmet Till is mentioned on more than occasion. Till was a fourteen-year-old boy killed in Money, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955. While on vacation from Chicago, he reportedly whistled at a white woman whom he had seen in a store. That night, he was taken from his bed, beaten, shot, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River by two men. An all-white jury later found both men innocent of murder.

There are several other such names and events mentioned in this novel, of course, and teachers should welcome the chance to fully explain such phenomena to their students, of course, for this is precisely the sort of education, enlightenment, and extracurricular inquiry that this novel is meant to foster in the first place.

On a more familiar and less disturbing note, the names of countless African American pop music performers are mentioned in this novel, as are those of several poets, novelists, artists, and musicians both African American and otherwise. Not only do we learn how and why Betsey and her family are fiercely proud of what their race is trying to accomplish socially and politically, we also learn of their ardent respect for the artistic, musical, and cultural endeavors of Africa's descendants. This dual esteem, this double-edged pride, is crucial to any understanding of *Betsey Brown* as a novel—and ultimately, it is exactly the idea that Greer Brown is trying to pass on to his children. So, in preparing students to read this book, teachers will want to make sure such important names in late-1950s popular music as Tina Turner, Smokey Robinson, Ben E. King, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker are familiar to the pupils. At the very least, students should be made aware that the presence of Tina Turner, Miles Davis, and so forth in this novel is contingent upon, and thus wholly reflective of, their important deeds and lasting accomplishments as Black cultural heroes.

QUESTIONS ON
COMPREHENSION

Below are two sets of questions about this novel. The first set aims to help students understand the meanings, distinguish the characters, and follow the plot developments of *Betsey Brown*. The second set, which is meant for classwide discussion, focuses on the broader topics and trends in the book. After these questions, there is a series of “Suggestions for Further Study.” Since the novel is deeply rooted in the Civil Rights movement, teachers are encouraged to arm their students with a considerable degree of background information on that era—how it came about, what it sought to achieve, what it meant in its own time, and what it means today. These final “Suggestions” will direct all parties so interested or inclined toward a vital part of our history.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Who is Betsey Brown? How old is she, where does she live, and who are the people she lives with? Consider the role, or roles, Betsey plays in her family in chapter one. Where does she rank in terms of the ages and responsibilities of the Brown children? What does she bring to her mother every morning? And why does her mother think of Betsey as a “miracle child”?
2. On pages 22 and 23, we encounter two poems. One is a verse by Paul Laurence Dunbar that Betsey has memorized as a school assignment; the other, a chant that Greer, Betsey’s father, has taught his children to sing with him each morning. Look again at these poems. What are their meanings and purposes? Why has Betsey been asked to recite this particular poem in class? Why has Greer instructed his children to perform alongside him in this particular sing-a-long?
3. Explain the “morning quiz” practice that we are introduced to in the book’s opening pages. Whose idea is this? Who gives the quiz, who takes it, and what is the reason for it to begin with? What does the quiz tell us about Betsey’s family, about her own unique background? Why does Jane, Betsey’s mother, dislike the morning quiz? Why does her father seem to find it absolutely necessary?
4. We are introduced to many different characters in chapter one, different individuals with different personalities. Who are they? Identify the main characters in this novel, explaining how they think and feel about one another. Although the book focuses on Betsey, and is named after her, we read and learn a great deal about several other persons. Why do you think this is the case?

CHAPTER TWO

1. What purpose does St. Louis, Missouri, serve in this narrative? How is it described in chapter two, in the beginning sentences and throughout the chapter? How does Betsey fit into St. Louis? Where does she attend school? What does she like about school, and what does she dislike? Is Betsey from St. Louis originally? What about the rest of her family?
2. After school, Betsey enjoys an ice cream soda with her good friends Veejay and Charlotte Ann. The three of them then decide to pay a visit to the home of their friend Susan Linda. How is Susan Linda different from the rest of the girls, and how is she the same? What happens when Susan Linda asks the girls to leave, and why does Betsey agree with Veejay that “they should ‘boycott’ Susan Linda for a while”?
3. Re-read the thoughts and reflections had by Betsey on pages 42 and 43, while she is relaxing in her secret hiding place, the oak tree. How does she feel about segregation? About “the true crackers down there in the South”? About the recent attempts to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas? What does Betsey think of her father’s claim that “a struggle makes you not afraid”—and what exactly does her father mean by this remark?
4. Describe in detail what happens to Charlie and Allard in this chapter. How does this event highlight the outlooks and dispositions of—and the relationship between—Jane (Betsey’s mother) and Vida (Betsey’s grandmother)? Where does Betsey stand in relation to these opposing viewpoints?

CHAPTER THREE

1. What do Betsey’s parents do for a living? What are their professional lives like? How do their jobs influence their performances as parents? And why are they arguing when chapter three begins? On page 50, we read: “Betsey thought she understood it. She thought she knew that the problem was there were too many of them. Too many children. Too wild. Too much noise. . . . Then there was the problem of the white people and money. White folks and money seemed to go hand in hand. Whenever a Negro mentioned one, he mentioned the other.” How accurate is Betsey’s take on her parents’ rocky marriage? Defend your answer.
2. On page 53, Betsey considers returning to her secret place, her gigantic yet private oak, to briefly escape from her noisy siblings: “If she climbed out to the middle of the tree, Betsey thought, she’d be a bird and sing a colored child’s bird song, a colored child’s blues song or a hot jump and rag song. From the middle of her tree, where she was sure she was not supposed to be, Betsey listened real close for

her city to sing to her so she could respond.” Often in literature, in ancient poems as well as modern novels, birds are symbols for the human spirit. Is Betsey presented here in such a way? Explain. What is she be thinking or wondering about, or looking or hoping for, as she sits in her tree?

3. Who is Bernice Calhoun? Where does she come from, and what brings her to the Brown household? What do we learn about Bernice from the blues she sings to herself when Betsey first spots her? Describe Bernice’s appearance, personality, background, and manner with children. Why does she have such a terribly difficult time at the Brown home?

4. Consider the mistaken impression Jane has of her oldest daughter at the closing of chapter three. On page 64, Jane thinks: “There was no way in the world she could go to work today. Thank God for Betsey. There was one child with a head on her shoulders. Jane tried to think of what might have happened if Betsey hadn’t been there. . . .” Explain why these thoughts are so sharply ironic. How did you feel about Betsey when you finished reading this chapter? How did you feel about Bernice? With whom did you finally place your sympathy?

CHAPTER FOUR

1. When Betsey goes to school and tells her friend Veejay about Bernice’s abrupt departure, how does Veejay react? Why does Veejay react so strongly? And how does Veejay’s reaction make Betsey feel? Explain why their friendship is so seriously threatened. What does Betsey learn about herself—and about her friend Veejay—from the Bernice episode?

2. Define the character of Eugene Boyd. Who is he? How does he relate to the story of Betsey and her family? Where does he come from, what is he known for, and how does Betsey feel about him? Explain the significance of how Betsey and Eugene first meet. What activity is Eugene engaged in, and where is Betsey situated?

3. What do Betsey and Eugene learn about each other in chapter four, and what do we as readers learn about these two characters? Why does Betsey tell Eugene that she already has a boyfriend? And why does she suddenly decide to put on her Sunday-school dress?

4. What impression are we given of Vida (Betsey’s grandmother) in this chapter? What does she think of Eugene? When Betsey says, ““Oh Grandma, you don’t understand,”” Vida answers: ““That’s what you think.”” How would you characterize the relationship Vida has with her grandchildren? What role does Vida play in the Brown home? How do her authority and influence over the children differ from Jane’s? Or Greer’s? What does Vida mean when she says of Betsey’s fancy outfit:

“That dress does more telling than your mouth’ll ever do”? Compare and contrast the bond Betsey has with Vida to that which she has with Jane.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. At the outset of the fifth chapter, we are introduced to Regina. Describe this character. What job does she do for the Brown family? Does she do her job well? Explain why or why not. How does each of the children feel about Regina, and what does their grandmother think of her?

2. Who is Roscoe? What role does he play in Regina’s decision to leave the Brown household? Look again at the quarrel Regina has with Vida on pages 86 through 88. What are the two opposing viewpoints of this quarrel? How do Regina and Vida feel about one another, and why? Why does there seem to be no common ground between them?

3. Consider the ideas and illustrations of “love” that we are given in chapter five. How would you say love is defined by the various characters (such as Regina, Roscoe, Betsey, and Eugene)? Why does the phrase, “When you’re really in love, there’s never enough to go around” appear so many times, and what do you think it means?

4. On page 90, we encounter one of this book’s primary themes: the integration of America’s public schools. Consider what the idea of scholastic integration means to the Browns—as a family, as African American individuals, and as Black schoolchildren. How does Jane feel about sending her children to predominantly white schools on the other side of town? How does Greer feel about it? How do the parents’ feelings about this issue reflect on their marriage more generally? Compare and contrast the issue of integration—as it is understood in the Brown home, that is—to the “morning quiz” that we learned about in chapter one.

CHAPTER SIX

1. At the beginning of this chapter, the children are getting ready to depart for their first day of integrated education. Describe the atmosphere of the Brown’s busy kitchen during this scene. Jane tells her husband (on page 97), “Dammit, Greer, between you, the Supreme Court, the buses, and the boys, I think I might die. I swear, I think I just might die.” What do you think Jane is nervous about or afraid of? Compare and contrast her outlook with that of her husband, who has stated earlier (on page 95) that “separate and equal [is] not separate and equal, just separate.” What differences between Jane and Greer are brought to the forefront by the prospect of integration?

2. Think back on the impression you had of Vida, Betsey's grandmother, while reading chapter six. What does she think of desegregation? How does she regard the matter as it relates to the children? On page 95, she keeps saying, "I don't understand this. I just don't understand this." Then, on page 98, after the kids have gone off to catch their respective buses, she thinks to herself: "They got some nerve, those foolish urchins. They've got the honor of being Americans. They free and smart. They got good blood." Explain Vida's thoughts about what her grandchildren are faced with. Why are her emotions so paradoxical?

3. Allard is the youngest of the Brown children. One aspect of his being so young is that he always plays with matches. Another is that he cannot yet tie his shoes. Still another, more general aspect is how impressionable he is. Charlie, for example, opts to include Allard in his own troublemaking actions on more than one occasion. Identify at least two such instances, in this chapter and elsewhere. What impact does Charlie's schoolyard brawl with five boys of Italian descent have on Allard?

4. On page 95, Allard corrects a joking remark made by his father as if by rote: "Daddy, I am not colored. I am a Negro." Later, Allard returns from school to announce (on page 106): "Look, Grandma, the white folks didn't kill me." Vida's reply is delivered honestly, directly, and immediately: "Of course not, Allard. They only kill little boys who don't mind." What is Jane's reaction to this exchange? How are Allard's ideas and feelings concerning white people influenced—both positively and negatively—by his elders? What about the other Brown children?

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. What does Betsey think of her new school? How does she like being around so many white kids? In the last chapter (on page 102), she admits to her boyfriend: "They weren't nearly as bad as I thought they'd be, Eugene. Honest. Why I even made one friend. . . . But they're not like us. . . . It's almost like going to another country." Yet, as chapter seven begins, her perspective has clearly changed. Explain how it has changed, and why. What does it mean when Betsey realizes (on page 110), "[N]ow she was competing with the white children—as if that hadn't been the case in the beginning"?

2. Describe the hop-scotch game Betsey plays by herself on page 112. What does she write on the sidewalk? Why does she feel the need to write such things? And why does she run away from home, later in this chapter? How would you describe her behavior—is it mischievous, rebellious, adventuresome, or otherwise? Defend your answer with quotations from the novel.

3. Why does Greer say to Jane, on page 114: “‘I’m going to learn how to play cards, so I could see you sometimes’”? What are the public and private reasons for Greer and Jane’s troubled relationship? How do the increasingly apparent tensions and increasingly serious problems of their marriage affect their children, especially Betsey?

4. Consider the crucial function of music in this chapter. On page 114, Betsey turns the radio up loud while listening to Bessie Smith sing the blues, but her mother yells at her to turn it off and go to bed. “If it wasn’t for Greer these children would have some sense,” thinks Jane. “All that nasty colored music.” But why is the music so important to Betsey? And why can’t Jane recognize this? What does the music do to Betsey? What does it mean to her? And what about Vida? What are the special effects—as detailed on page 115—that this music has on Betsey’s grandmother? Finally, recall how Betsey is teased by her sisters Margot and Sharon for liking this “niggah noise” so much. What role does music play in Betsey’s decision to run away? Does the music she hears in chapter seven symbolize, or stand for, anything other than itself? If so, what? What about elsewhere in the novel?

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. Where is Betsey headed when she runs away from home? And why has she chosen this particular destination? What does she hope to find there, and why does she consider this place preferable to her home? Also, describe the characters we meet in this chapter. What is Mrs. Maureen like? Describe her personality. What sort of business does she run—in public and in private? Why does Betsey look up to her? And who is Mr. Tavaneer?

2. Another character we meet in this chapter is one we have met before: Regina. What has happened to Regina since Betsey last saw her? What is she doing at Mrs. Maureen’s beauty parlor? Betsey and Regina (or “Gina”) obviously care about one another a great deal, yet they are very different people with very different backgrounds. Explain these differences. What does Gina mean when she tells Betsey (on page 136): “[T]here’s all different kinds of colored folks. You’re one kind and I’m another, that’s all.” And explain why Gina wonders to herself, on the following page: “How could she ever have a child like Betsey, who heard the word colored and thought of something good?”

3. While being pampered by Mrs. Maureen on page 138, Betsey all of a sudden starts laughing—a loud and “inappropriate” laugh. What is Betsey laughing at? What is the vital realization that she has suddenly come to? Describe the epiphany Betsey has just experienced, and describe how it fits into the larger themes of this novel. Why is it so important that Betsey had this realization while away from home, on her own, and—given that her head is under a dryer and she cannot hear what anyone is saying—relatively by herself?

4. Describe the scene that chapter eight ends on. How does Betsey decide to conclude her personal quest? Why does she go to so much trouble to crown herself “Queen of the Negro Veiled Prophet”? What does it mean, this title she creates for herself? And how is Betsey able to claim, on page 140, with such confidence: “She wasn’t afraid anymore. The city was hers.” Explain in detail what the hero of this novel has conquered. Explain what it is that Betsey no longer fears.

CHAPTER NINE

1. Chapter nine opens with a prayer being spoken aloud. Who is saying this prayer, and why? Describe how the various members of the Brown family understand and practice their religious faith, in this chapter and elsewhere. How do Jane and Vida feel about religion? And how do the children feel? What about Greer? Explain the following passage, which appears on page 143: “Greer had faith in his people, not in Jesus, not in the police, not in the pastor called to comfort Vida, already mildly sedated to prevent aggravation of her heart.”

2. Once Betsey has gone missing, how do the differing religious convictions of Jane and Greer further complicate their already volatile marriage? On page 145, Jane tells him: “If you can’t pray for your own daughter, maybe you don’t belong in this house.” Then Greer, who has decided to go look for his daughter by car, wonders how in the world “could he explain to Jane that Betsey wanted to be an Ikette.” How are Jane and Greer’s disagreements about religion related to, or indicative of, their disagreements about how to raise their children? And, after all, what does Betsey’s desire to be an “Ikette” singer actually mean—both literally and figuratively?

3. When Betsey encounters her father at the hospital, she tells him (on page 149) why she ran away, admitting, among other things: “I want my nappy hair to be pretty like Mommy’s and refined like she is. And I just can’t do it.” So Greer tells her a secret: “[Y]our mother’s got a head full of nappy hair. She gets something done to it.” Why does this superficial personal grooming habit, this rather trivial beauty-parlor detail, make Betsey feel much closer to her mother?

4. Upon her daughter’s safe return, why does Jane identify with Betsey so strongly? Why does she think to herself, on page 153: “Maybe Betsey’s excursion wasn’t just a child’s first itch to be in the world. Maybe Betsey’s flight offered Jane a glimpse of herself fifteen years ago, when she wasn’t always shouting ‘no’ or figuring what was for dinner”? And how does this bond that the mother feels for her daughter agree with, or stem from, the idea expressed in chapter nine’s last sentence (“Jane was still becoming herself”)?

CHAPTER TEN

1. Look again at the first few pages of this chapter. What are Jane and Greer fighting about? What is the main point each parent is trying to make in this heated exchange?
2. As the fight continues for a couple of pages, what is each parent effectively arguing *for*? Explain why both Jane and Greer are so adamantly clinging to their convictions? Finally, why does Jane decide to go “away for a while,” slamming the front door behind her on page 160?
3. When Jane leaves, Greer immediately starts to pray that his wife will return to him. But, as we have seen already, Greer is not a religious person. Explain this conflicted behavior, and then explain how (on page 161) Greer can say to himself both “he didn’t know how to go on without her” and “a man had to stand for something.” What are the responsibilities that Greer has assigned for himself as a husband, father, doctor, and responsible African-American citizen? What are the conflicts inherent in these responsibilities?
4. How do the children react to Jane’s departure? How do Greer and Vida react? What similarities and differences do you see in Jane’s decision to leave home and Betsey’s earlier decision to do the same?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. Who is Carrie? Where did this vivid new character come from? Why is she now living and working in the Brown residence? Describe her background, physical appearance, personal attire, and manner of speaking and thinking. Does she have any family of her own? If so, where are they? Why does she refuse to use any of the bathrooms in the Browns’ home? Compare and contrast Carrie to the other ladies who have looked after the Brown children thus far in the novel, including Bernice, Regina, Vida, and Jane. What qualities set Carrie apart? Has Carrie obtained results that the other women were incapable of? If so, what are they?
2. Consider the children’s relations with Carrie. What do they think of her? Do they listen to her, obey her, and respect her? Support your answer by citing certain scenes or dialogue. Look again at the household chores that Carrie assigns and delegates to the children on pages 172 and 173. What sorts of things does Carrie teach the Brown children that their currently absent mother could not, or would not, have taught them before?

3. What does Vida think of Carrie, and what are her impressions based on? How does Mr. Jeff, the local gardener, feel about Carrie? What do we come to learn about Carrie and Mr. Jeff's friendship? And why does Vida have a problem with this friendship?

4. Describe the bond that develops between Carrie and Betsey in this chapter. Why does their relationship become closer—more honest or tender perhaps—when Carrie tells Betsey (on page 171) about her own mother? What do we find out about Carrie's mother? How are Betsey's feelings about Carrie similar to—and different from—her feelings about Jane? In what ways is Carrie acting as a replacement mother-figure to Betsey and the other children? Describe the lecture that Carrie is planning to give Betsey as this chapter comes to an end. Why does Carrie think such a lecture is now required?

CHAPTER TWELVE

1. “She works roots. I'm sure of it,” is what Vida says to herself (on page 175) about Carrie. What does Vida mean by this? What does she fear Carrie is up to? Also, can you identify other examples of figurative language in *Betsey Brown*, as used by Vida or anyone else?

2. Look again at Vida's interior monologue on page 176. Why is she so suspicious of Carrie, and what are her other reasons for disliking Carrie so much? Explain the irony of Carrie's getting the whole house in order—and getting all of the children to not only behave but help out with the chores—during Jane's absence from the Brown home.

3. On page 180, Carrie tells the children about her deeply troubled past—and about her children, whom she has not seen in years. What has become of Carrie's past husbands, and where her children now? What sort of mother was Carrie? Why are the Brown children not bothered by the many unsettling skeletons in her closet? As a reader, did your view of Carrie change when you learned these things about her? Explain why or why not.

4. At the end of this chapter, after she has had an important conversation with Betsey, Carrie whispers a quotation to herself. Who and what is she quoting? What is the significance of this quote? Where have we seen it before, and what does it mean in the context of Betsey's crisis at school (that is, the problem she'd been discussing with Carrie in the first place)? Also, how does this quote apply to the larger themes and ideas of this novel?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. What are we told about Jane's return, and what are we not told? Why do you think she has chosen to return to her family and her home? Support your answer with textual references.
2. Has Jane changed since her departure? How so? What aspects of her personal outlook and her feelings about her family seem fundamentally different? In particular, how has Jane's view of her husband changed?
3. Look again at the "short talk" Jane has with Carrie on page 193. Why is Jane so upset with her? What are the complaints that Jane is making, and do all of these issues seem justified to you? Explain your answer by citing the book as much as possible. And how does Carrie defend herself? Describe the touchy if not difficult relationship these two women have. Was such an uneasy relationship inevitable, given the circumstances of the novel? Explain why or why not.
4. Compare and contrast the "facts of female life" speeches delivered to the Betsey and the other Brown girls in this chapter. One is given by Jane; the other, by Carrie. What do Jane and Carrie's presentations tell us about the backgrounds, personalities, values, and priorities of their respective selves? How, especially, does Betsey react to these two short lectures? Given that she laughs during each conversation, how and why does Betsey's laughter differ from one to the next?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. On page 200, we read that Jane thinks of her recent flight from both house and family as a "vacation." What does this term tell us about how she thinks of what she has done? Does she feel guilty for leaving? Or should she feel guilty in the first place? Does Jane seem likely to ever do something like this again? Explain why or why not. How does Greer feel about Jane's "vacation"? What is the state of their relationship—or, how healthy does their marriage seem—as the book comes to a close?
2. When Carrie does not show up for duty come Monday morning (page 204), Betsey decides to cover for her. But, as we read: "Everything went haywire." All the other children start making one mess after another. The kitchen starts to fall to pieces. Compare and contrast this hectic scene to the one that begins the novel (wherein Betsey is getting coffee for her mother and trying to memorize a poem for school). What has changed? What has stayed the same? Do the characters seem more familiar to you? Or more real, or more important? Or are they every bit as unpredictable as they were when we first met them? Explain your answers.

QUESTIONS FOR
CLASS DISCUSSION

3. What is the purpose of Carrie's urgent phone call, and what is the result? What has happened to Carrie? Why is it significant that we only hear one side of this phone call—that is, Jane's side? What are we told about Carrie's predicament, and what are we not told? Explain why the author may have wanted to leave the details of Carrie's problem to our imagination. Also, look back to pages 179 and 180, where Carrie tells Betsey: "I aint goin nowhere. Don't you worry bout a thing. I'm gointa stay right here with you. I've made enough mistakes in my life awready." In light of this exchange, were you surprised to see Carrie make a "mistake" that caused her to leave the Brown family? Explain why or why not.

4. How does Betsey react to Carrie's leaving? Is she really depressed by this event, or merely disappointed? How did you feel, as a reader, seeing Carrie go? Did her departure make for a happier or sadder ending? Does Jane's return to the Brown family lessen the impact of Carrie's exit? Explain why you do or do not think so. Finally, at the end of the novel, Betsey realizes that Carrie would have said there is "nothing dishonorable about being an Ikette." What is Betsey telling us, in sum, with this all-important last thought? What do we learn from her "Ikette dream" about Betsey's relationships with her mother, with her friend Carrie, and with the world that she sees from the tree outside her bedroom terrace?

1. Think for a moment about the setting of *Betsey Brown*, the world in which the novel takes place. How familiar does this world seem? When is this novel set, and where, exactly? On page 16, we read: "Sound traveled uncannily in this house and everybody was always yelling to everybody else. Arguing all the time. Howdy-Doody or American Bandstand, Little Rock or Amos and Andy." Can you identify these images? What do they suggest to you? What are the historical and personal contexts of *Betsey Brown*? Discuss the conflicts, differences, and struggles at the heart of this story.

2. Look again at the epigraph that begins *Betsey Brown*, the poem by Jessica Hagedorn. Describe how it relates to the novel in general, and how it relates to the character of Betsey in particular.

3. Although this novel is entitled *Betsey Brown*, Betsey is not actually the narrator. Who is telling this story? Think about how the thoughts and feelings of the various characters are communicated to us, the readers. Is there any character we encounter whose thoughts and feelings we *are not* privy to, or is our third-person narrator also an omniscient one? How does the author of this book put us into the minds of her characters? Compare and contrast the voices, speech patterns, thought processes, and overall perspectives of any two of the main characters. How and why did these

qualities seem so different as you were reading the book? How does the author achieve this? Does one character's voice or perspective carry more weight or have more authority in the novel, or are the personalities of the characters treated equally? Why do some characters in *Betsey Brown* use the words "ain't" and "colored" while other use the words "isn't" and "Negro?" Explain how real—or how true, credible, or believable—this story seemed to you, in light of how its characters were portrayed.

4. This is a passage from page 43: "Betsey always felt better when Papa came home. Then he'd play Machito or Lee Morgan. Sometimes he'd put on the colored radio and listen to the blues or turn Bo Diddley way up high. Betsey loved Jackie Wilson. She couldn't wait to see Jackie Wilson in person." Identify a few other passages where Betsey truly connects with those around her—friends, relatives, or strangers—through music. What does this novel tell us about the role played by popular culture in the formation of a young child's identity? Has your own experience with music resembled Betsey's in any way? Explain how, if so.

5. The historical figure of Emmet Till is mentioned at least twice in this novel, on pages 45 and 96. Who was this person, and what happened to him? Discuss other instances in this book where the story of our nation's Civil Rights movement collides with the story of Betsey and her friends and family. Since this is, among other things, a historical novel, what did it teach you about the history of race and racism in America? Do you feel in any way closer to history, having read *Betsey Brown*, or more sensitive to the experiences of those in the past? If so, identify specific passages in the text that explain why you feel this way. Also, did you find that you could personally identify with any of the characters in *Betsey Brown*? If so, say whom and explain why.

6. At the end of chapter five, Betsey once again climbs her favorite tree in order to peacefully and privately reflect on the world around her—and the world inside her. We read: "Through her tree she could see the stars and clouds that were so lithe the moon shone through them. She wondered if the white children saw things like that. Did they search the skies at night for beauty and answers to wishes? The darkness was a comfort to her. . . . This was one night she would see all the stars and the moon as the sun rose, when there was that peculiar mingling of past and tomorrows, when the sun glanced cross the sky to the moon hoverin over the telephone wires, and everyone else was ignorant of the powers of light and the dark." Night and day, darkness and light, and Black children and white children: what do these images seem to symbolize to Betsey? Discuss the symbolic importance of this passage. Identify other instances of symbolism in *Betsey Brown*.

7. Think about how St. Louis is portrayed in this book. What do we learn about the social, geographical, historical, and racial characteristics that it possessed in 1959? We know, of course, that it is a big city, yet it also seems like a small town sometimes. Where in the narrative do you get this impression, and what do you suppose is the cause of it? Who are Mrs. Blackman, Mr. Robinson, Mr. Tavaner, Mrs. Maureen, and Mr. Jeff, and how do they contribute to the intimacy or closeness that Betsey seems to feel with regard to St. Louis? Near the end of the story, on page 207, we read: “Betsey lingered over her city making decisions and discoveries about herself that would change the world.” Why is St. Louis “her city” by the end of the story, and what are important things that Betsey’s is learning about herself? Is there any connection between Betsey’s “decisions and discoveries” and the ownership or fond possession she seems to feel about St. Louis? Explain your answer by looking back on Betsey’s many adventures in the city.

8. Considering such key issues as personal growth, intimate relationships, personality, familial responsibility, and one’s perspectives of other people and the world at large, describe the changes that Jane and her daughter Betsey go through over the course of the novel. They both seem to be making a journey of self-discovery in the pages of this book, but what are they learning about themselves? How are the paths that they travel similar? How are they different?

9. Throughout the course of *Betsey Brown*, Vida spends a lot of time remembering the joy and laughter she once knew alongside her dear departed Frank. Jane spends a lot of time remembering the carefree days and love-struck happiness she used to know with Greer, before they had several children to look after and a gigantic house to take care of. Comment on the role that past plays in *Betsey Brown*, not just the personal reflections of the characters but also larger issues like slavery. What does Vida mean when she refers to something that happened before she was born by saying (on page 105), “‘There’s some things you never forget, Jane. It runs in you blood memory. That’s what it does’”? What are the themes that “run in the blood memory” of Ntozake Shange’s novel?

10. On several occasions in this story, we learn what a character is thinking or feeling by witnessing him or her sing an improvised song, whether it is a blues sung on a sidewalk, a jump-rope chant done at recess, or something else entirely. As an exercise in creative writing and creative thinking, take one of the songs you have read in this novel and turn it into your own. Substitute all the words however you would like to, but try to keep the very same rhythm as the song you have chosen. Change one of the songs in *Betsey Brown* into a tune about how you felt when you woke up this morning, for example. Share your own song with your class, if so inclined and inspired, and then compare communicating in song to communicating with just words. Which form do you think Betsey would prefer, and why?

First, all teachers bringing *Betsey Brown* into a classroom setting should consider acquainting themselves—if only partially or casually—as well as their students with the wide variety of late-1950s music that is so important to this story. Greer Brown employs music as a “teaching tool” when quizzing his children each morning on Black culture and African history; teachers can use it in a similar fashion with their students. Such a musical investigation—carried out in class with the aid of compact discs, for instance—would fascinate and amuse students of all levels and ages.

Surely any student, after reading *Betsey Brown*, would be highly entertained by an informal discussion on the musical merits, qualities, and accomplishments of such soul/R&B performers as Tina Turner and Ben E. King; such blues singers as Etta James and Bessie Smith; and such jazz musicians as Lee Morgan and Cab Calloway. These are, after all, people whose art has had a profound impact on Betsey and her family. So, if one aims to understand the motivations and passions of Betsey and her family, it is vitally important that one has experienced this art firsthand.

As a coming-of-age story, *Betsey Brown* is part of a strong, varied, and long-running literary tradition. For purposes of comparison and contrast, students who found this novel especially fascinating, instructive, or otherwise compelling might next consider a novel of adolescence with a main character and/or primary perspective that differs from that of *Betsey Brown*. Though this list is by no means exhaustive, any of the following books would, if set next to Ntozake Shange’s novel, produce several enlightening mirror images and counterpoints: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain; *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger; *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee; *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell; *Stonewall’s Gold* by Robert J. Mrazek; and *What Girls Learn* by Karin Cook.

Other students who have enjoyed by this novel might wish to seek out other of Shange’s writings. She has published several volumes of fiction, drama, and poetry, including the highly regarded play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, as well as the novels *Liliane* and *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*.

Like *Betsey Brown*, the films *Cooley High* (directed by Michael Schultz), *Southern Comfort* (directed by Martin Ritt), *Boyz n the Hood* (directed by John Singleton), *Crooklyn* (directed by Spike Lee), and *A Raisin in the Sun* (directed by Daniel Petrie) also depict young African-Americans growing up in troubled times. These films all take place at vital or else representative moments in modern American history, so any of them could be usefully and productively considered by a class alongside Shange’s novel. For example, reading *Betsey Brown* and then watching the film *Cooley High* might foster a discussion of why, where, and when storytelling and history have thus far intersected in the Black high school experience.

Lastly, no contemporary words of advice regarding further research or additional scholarship would be complete without acknowledgment of the Internet. Students should—as a matter of course, by this point—be fully encouraged and enabled to access the World Wide Web when they are seeking additional data about desegregation, the American Civil Rights movement, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the “Little Rock Nine,” the difference between Kenyan or Guatemalan coffee, the jazz trumpet wizardry of Lee Morgan, or any other historical or cultural touchstone exhibited in the pages of *Betsey Brown*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ntozake Shange is a renowned playwright (*for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* and *Three Pieces*), poet (*Nappy Edges*, *A Daughter's Geography*, and *The Love Space Demands*), and novelist (*Liliane* and *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*). She lives in Houston.

Scott Pitcock wrote this teacher's guide. He majored in English at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, and later obtained an MFA in Writing from Columbia University. He now works in book publishing and lives in New York City.

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