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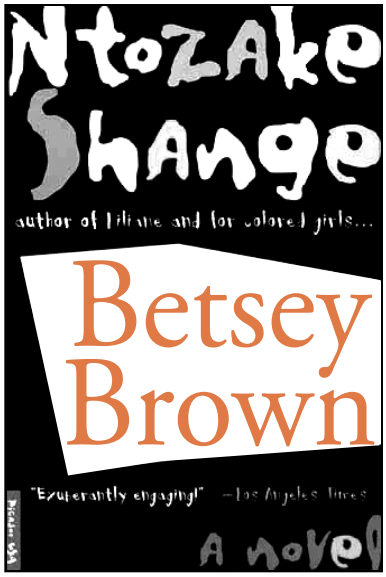
TEACHER'S GUIDE

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 perceptive 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 Betsey's friends, her family, her home, her school, and her world. This world, though a work of fiction, is based in history, specifically the nationwide school desegregation events of the Civil Rights movement. As such, *Betsey Brown* is a historical novel that will speak to and broaden the perspective of readers both familiar with and unaware of America's domestic affairs of 1950s and 1960s.

Shange has set her story in the fall of 1959, when St. Louis started to desegregate its schools. In May of 1954, in its ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*—a verdict now widely seen as the origin of the Civil Rights movement—the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation. *Betsey Brown* is located in the wake of this landmark ruling; the plot of Shange's novel and the history of America's quest for integration are interwoven. Thus references abound to the watershed events at Little Rock's Central High School in 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, 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 and refined social worker who is overwhelmed by the vast size of her fledgling family and who cares very little for "all that nasty colored music." Many fascinating characters populate this novel—and trying to figure them out will appeal to students of all backgrounds—but the two characters who, after Betsey, most influence the narrative 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, serves as the backdrop for Betsey's lip-synching, poem-reciting, soul-searching, truth-seeking, and tree-climbing.

Betsey Brown is panoramic yet personal. It shows what being a Black student in the early days of American desegregation was like by showing what being Betsey is like. This is an episodic saga of the Black experience at the end of the Fifties, but it is also a story about the familiar growing pains of a precocious young protagonist. We see Betsey fall in love; make friends; say prayers; argue with, look after, inspire, and ignore her younger siblings; 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, an outcast. We see Betsey at the door of her womanhood, and are left to wonder at what she will find beyond it.

PRAISE FOR BETSEY BROWN

"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*

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Teacher's Guide primarily offers two sets of questions about Shange's novel. The first set aims to help students understand the meanings, distinguish the characters, and follow the plot of *Betsey Brown*. The second set, meant for classwide discussion, focuses on the book's broader topics and trends. After these questions comes a series of "Suggestions for Further Study." These concluding suggestions will assist students and teachers wishing to enrich their enjoyment (or deepen their understanding) of *Betsey Brown*.

1. Who is Betsey Brown? How old is she? Where does she live? Consider the role, or roles, Betsey plays in her family. Where does she rank in the ages and responsibilities of the Brown children? What does she bring to her mother every morning?

2. On pages 22 and 23, we encounter two poems. One is by Paul Laurence Dunbar, which 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. What does each poem mean, in your view?

3. What purpose does St. Louis, Missouri, serve in the narrative? How is it described in chapter two? Where does Betsey attend school? What does she like (and dislike) about school? Is she from St. Louis originally? And is the rest of her family?

4. Re-read Betsey's musings on pages 42 and 43, while she is in her secret hiding place, the oak tree. How does she feel about the recent attempts to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas? What does she think of her father's claim that "a struggle makes you not afraid"—and what does her father mean by this?

5. What do Betsey's parents do for a living? 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." How accurate is Betsey's take on her parents' marriage?

6. Who is Bernice Calhoun? Where does she come from, and what brings her to the Brown household? Describe Bernice's appearance, personality, background, and manner with children. Why does she have such a difficult time at the Brown home?

7. Who is Eugene Boyd? How does figure in the story of Betsey and her family? Where does he come from? What is he known for? How does Betsey feel about him? Explain the significance of how he and Betsey first meet.

8. What impression are we given of Vida (Betsey's grandmother) in chapter four? What does she think of Eugene? Describe the relationship Vida has with her grandkids. What role does she play in the Brown home? How do her authority and influence over the children differ from Jane's? Or Greer's? Compare and contrast the bond Betsey has with Vida to that which she has with Jane—and with Greer.

9. Consider the ways in which "love" is depicted 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 in this chapter? And what do you think it means?

10. 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 school

children. 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, if at all, do the parents' feelings about this issue reflect their marriage more generally?

11. What impression did you get of Vida, Betsey's grandmother, while reading chapter six? How does she feel about desegregation? 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 desegregation means for her grandchildren. Why are her emotions so paradoxical?

12. Allard is the youngest of the Brown children; he always plays with matches and is very impressionable. What impact does Charlie's schoolyard brawl with five boys of Italian descent (in chapter six) have on Allard? And how are Allard's ideas and feelings concerning white people influenced—both positively and negatively—by his elders? What about the other Brown children?

13. What does Betsey think of her new school? What problems does she have with it? As chapter seven begins, Betsey's perspective on white kids has clearly changed. Why? What does it mean when she realizes (on page 110), "[N]ow she was competing with the white children—as if that hadn't been the case in the beginning"?

14. Consider the crucial function of music in chapter seven. On page 114, Betsey turns the radio up while listening to Bessie Smith sing the blues, but her mother yells at her to turn it off and go to bed. Why is the music so important to Betsey? What special effects—as detailed on page 115—does this music have on Betsey's grandmother? How does music inform Betsey's decision to run away? Does the music she hears in this chapter symbolize or stand for anything other than itself? If so, what? What about elsewhere in the book?

15. Where is Betsey headed when she runs away from home? Why has she chosen this destination? What does she hope to find? And 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? Another character we encounter in chapter eight is one we have met before: Regina. What has happened to her since Betsey last saw her? Why is she at Mrs. Maureen's beauty parlor?

16. 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 what the hero of this novel has conquered. Explain what it is that Betsey no longer fears.

17. Chapter nine opens with a prayer being spoken aloud. Who is saying it? Why? Describe how the 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? What is meant by the statement (on page 143) that "Greer had faith in his people"?

18. Upon her daughter's safe return, Jane intensely identifies with Betsey. Explain why and how this occurs. How does this strong bond that the mother feels for her daughter agree with or echo the idea expressed in chapter nine's final sentence?

19. When Jane leaves, in chapter ten, Greer immediately starts to pray that his wife will return to him. But, as we have seen already, Greer is not really a religious person. Explain this apparent conflict in his behavior.

20. How do the children react to Jane's departure? What about Greer and Vida? What similarities and differences do you see in Jane's decision to flee and Betsey's earlier decision to do the same?

21. Who is Carrie? Where did she come from? Describe her background, appearance, attire, and manner of speaking and thinking. Compare Carrie to the other ladies who have looked after the Brown children, including Bernice, Regina, Vida, and Jane. What qualities set Carrie apart? What do the Brown children think of her?

22. Describe the bond that develops between Carrie and Betsey. Why does their relationship become closer when Carrie tells Betsey (on page 171) about her own mother? What do we find out about Carrie's mother? How do Betsey's feelings about Carrie compare to her feelings about Jane?

23. "'She works roots. I'm sure of it,'" is what Vida says to herself (on page 175) about Carrie. What does Vida mean? What is she afraid of? Also, identify a few other examples of figurative language in the novel (as used by Vida or anyone else).

24. At the end of chapter twelve, after 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?

25. What are we told about Jane's return (in chapter thirteen)? What are we not told? Why has she chosen to return to her family? And how has Jane changed since her departure? In particular, how has her view of her husband changed?

26. Look again at the "short talk" Jane has with Carrie on page 193. Why is Jane so upset with her? What are the complaints Jane is making, and do all of these issues seem justified? And how does Carrie defend herself? Was the difficult relationship between these two women inevitable, given the novel's circumstances? Explain.

27. When Carrie does not show up on Monday morning (page 204), Betsey covers for her. But, as we read: "Everything went haywire." Compare this hectic morning scene with the one that begins the novel. What has changed—and what hasn't?

28. How does Betsey react to Carrie's leaving? How did you, as a reader, feel about it? Did Carrie's exit make for a happier or sadder ending to this novel? Explain. At the end of the story, Betsey thinks Carrie would have seen "nothing dishonorable [in] being an Ikette." What is Betsey communicating with this last thought? Finally, what do we learn from her "Ikette dream" about Betsey's relations with her mother, with Carrie, and with the world she sees from the tree outside her bedroom terrace?

1. Think about the setting of *Betsey Brown*, the world in which the book takes place. How familiar does this world seem? When is this novel set, and where?

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

3. As a class, discuss how the author puts us into the minds of her characters. Why do some characters in *Betsey Brown* use the words "ain't" and "colored" while other use "isn't" and "Negro?" Explain how real—how true, credible, or believable—this story seemed to you, especially in light of how its many characters are portrayed.

4. Identify a few passages from throughout the book where Betsey connects with those around her through music. Also, have your own experiences with the rhythms, sounds, or emotions of music ever resembled Betsey's? 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 he? 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. What did this book teach you about the history of race and/or racism in America? Also, could you personally identify with any of the characters in *Betsey Brown*? If so, say whom and explain.

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." Night and day, darkness and light, Black children and white children: what do these images seem to symbolize to Betsey? Discuss the symbolic import of this passage. Identify other instances of symbolism in *Betsey Brown*.

7. 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 is it telling or showing her?

8. Both Jane and Betsey make journeys of self-discovery. How are the paths that they travel similar—and different? In each case, what do they learn of themselves?

9. At one point, Vida thus refers to something that happened before she was born (on page 105): "'Some things you never forget, Jane. It runs in you blood memory.'" What major themes run through the "blood memory" of 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: a blues sung on a sidewalk, a jump-rope chant done at recess, and so on. As a creative writing exercise, convert a song from *Betsey Brown* into a song of your own by changing its words and ideas.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

All teachers including *Betsey Brown* in a classroom setting should consider acquainting themselves and their students with the wide variety of 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. (Tina Turner, Ben E. King, Etta James, and Cab Calloway are but a handful of the musicians whose artistry has great worth and meaning to Betsey and her family and friends.)

As a coming-of-age story, *Betsey Brown* is part of a strong and long-running literary tradition. For purposes of comparison/contrast, students who enjoyed this novel might next consider a tale of adolescence with a main character or primary perspective different from that of *Betsey Brown*. Though this list is by no means exhaustive, any of the following books would, if set next to Shange's novel, produce several enlightening mirror images and counterviews: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain; *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger; *I Capture the Castle** by Dodie Smith; *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. Also, students who liked this novel ought to explore Ntozake Shange's other writings. She has published 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), *Sounder* (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) depict young African-Americans growing up in challenging times. These movies all take place at vital or representative moments in modern American history, so any of them could be productively considered by a class alongside Shange's novel. For example, reading *Betsey Brown* and then watching the film *Cooley High* might foster a fruitful discussion of storytelling, history, and the Black high school experience.

Lastly, any advice on further research or additional scholarship must include acknowledgment of the Internet. Students should be—as a matter of course, by now—encouraged to access the World Wide Web when they are seeking additional data about desegregation, the American Civil Rights movement, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the "Little Rock Nine," the difference between Kenyan and Guatemalan coffee, the jazz wizardry of Lee Morgan, or any other historical or cultural touchstone in the pages of *Betsey Brown*.

(* = A Macmillan Teacher's Guide is also available for these titles.)

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, Texas. (This Teacher's Guide was written by Scott Pitcock. He works in book publishing and lives in New York City.)

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