



The Mothers

Brit Bennett

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A dazzling debut novel from an exciting new voice, *The Mothers* is a surprising story about young love, a big secret in a small community—and the things that ultimately haunt us most.

Set within a contemporary black community in Southern California, Brit Bennett's mesmerizing first novel is an emotionally perceptive story about community, love, and ambition. It begins with a secret.

"All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season."

It is the last season of high school life for Nadia Turner, a rebellious, grief-stricken, seventeen-year-old beauty. Mourning her own mother's recent suicide, she takes up with the local pastor's son. Luke Sheppard is twenty-one, a former football star whose injury has reduced him to waiting tables at a diner. They are young; it's not serious. But the pregnancy that results from this teen romance—and the subsequent cover-up—will have an impact that goes far beyond their youth. As Nadia hides her secret from everyone, including Aubrey, her God-fearing best friend, the years move quickly. Soon, Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey are full-fledged adults and still living in debt to the choices they made that one seaside summer, caught in a love triangle they must carefully maneuver, and dogged by the constant, nagging question: What if they had chosen differently? The possibilities of the road not taken are a relentless haunt.

In entrancing, lyrical prose, *The Mothers* asks whether a "what if" can be more powerful than an experience itself. If, as time passes, we must always live in servitude to the decisions of our younger selves, to the communities that have parented us, and to the decisions we make that shape our lives forever.

The Mothers Details

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From Reader Review The Mothers for online ebook

Larry H says

I'd rate this between 4 and 4.5 stars, closer to the latter.

There's an incredible sense of longing that pervades Brit Bennett's terrifically compelling debut novel, *The Mothers*. There's longing for love of all kinds—maternal, romantic, even the love of good friends—a longing for answers, a longing to find one's place in the world, and a longing for truth. But getting what you think you want doesn't always make things turn out right.

Nadia Turner is smart, destined for a future far better than her parents had. But at the end of her senior year of high school, her mother's unexpected suicide throws everything off-kilter. Her relationship with her father was never completely stable, and now he can't look at her for fear he's reminded of what he has lost. As she tries to make sense of this loss, she begins a relationship with Luke Sheppard, the son of the pastor of her church, a once-golden star athlete whose injury ends his future dreams, leaving him waiting tables at a local restaurant.

Four years her senior, Luke knows his relationship with Nadia is wrong, but he finds comfort in it. Nadia wants more from Luke than he can give, she wants him to take her home to his parents, to hold her hand in public, but instead they must keep everything secret. But when she gets pregnant, she knows the last thing she wants is to be tied to her hometown; she's planning to attend the University of Michigan and isn't going to let anything, much less a baby, hold her back. Although Nadia makes the decision how to handle things, she's unaware of who has their hands in the aftermath.

She spends the summer before college dealing with the consequences of her decision, and she befriends Aubrey Evans, a girl whose mother also abandoned her, although due to estrangement, not suicide. Aubrey and Nadia develop an intensely close bond, yet there is one secret that each girl never reveals to the other, secrets that affect them at every turn.

"...she too understood loss, how it drove you to imagine every possible scenario that might have prevented it."

When Nadia leaves for college, she doesn't come home for several years, and when she does, all of her relationships are more complicated than they were when she left. What does she want, to relive the past or continue building a life completely devoid of connection to what she's known? Can we really outrun the secrets we try to put behind us, no matter whom they may hurt?

The Mothers is showing up on a number of year-end best lists, and I certainly can see why. Bennett has created a narrative rich with emotion, secrets, and, yes, lies, and that sense of longing that I mentioned at the start of my review makes this story even richer. While the elements of the plot aren't necessarily unique, the puzzle pieces come together with great skill and beautiful storytelling. The narrative is accented by a Greek chorus of sorts comprised of the "mothers" of the local church—the elderly women who have seen it all more than once.

It's funny: all I kept thinking of as I read this book was the John Mayer song, "Daughters," particularly these lines:

*Girls become lovers who turn into mothers
So mothers be good to your daughters too*

I hope this book marks the start of a long and illustrious literary career for Bennett, because she certainly knows how to tell a story. The book isn't perfect, and some threads of the story are left unresolved, but it is still a rich and beautiful story worth reading.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blog...>

Julie says

The Mothers by Brit Bennett is a 2016 Riverhead publication.

This is another one of those 'buzz' books I wouldn't ordinarily read, but my curiosity got the better of me, so I checked it out of the library, just to see for myself why the book garnered such high praise.

The 'Mothers' are the women of Upper Room Chapel who basically gossip about the members of the church and keep track of the families who attend.

They narrate the story of Nadia, Luke, and Audrey, three young black people living in Southern California. Their lives interconnect during pivotal points in their young lives, forging strong emotional bonds, in the process, but the decisions made in their youth, the secrets they keep, will haunt them all through their adult lives.

The story is very emotional, the characters filled with a deep longing, regret, and desire. The reader is like a spectator as the characters live through life's ups and downs, make life altering choices, experience love, friendship, betrayal, and cope with the consequences. Life is not a fairy tale and this story demonstrates how, despite our best efforts, life throws us curve balls that upend all our good intentions, sending us off in directions we never envisioned.

This is not a resolvable, wrapped up in a nice neat little bow, happily ever after type novel. It's a sad story, but one that describes life and the repercussions of our decisions. The writing is sharp, but, deep character analysis is minimal. I felt like, instead of reading, I was watching all this on television or something, or like I was on the outside looking in. The inner thoughts of the characters are not prevalent, which is something I wished for.

Still, I do appreciate that this is a debut novel, and the author certainly has some writing chops. I think if the characters had been fleshed out a bit more, and if the ending hadn't been quite so abrupt, I would have enjoyed the book a little more. But, I do see why the story, with its contemporary setting, its boldness, the contrasts of religion with difficult topics, like abortion, resonates with readers.

Overall, this is an impressive debut, and I am glad I gave the book a try. Brit Bennett is definitely an author to keep an eye on.

3.5 stars

Elyse says

I can see why this novel is getting 'buzz'.

"All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripened secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this secret, a secret that began the spring Nadia Turner got knocked up by the pastor's son and went to the abortion clinic downtown to take care of it".

"She was seventeen then." She lived with her father, a Marine, and without her mother, who had killed herself six months earlier". Since then, the girl had earned a reputation--she was young and scared and trying to hide her scared in her prettiness".

Nadia is a bright African American - an excellent student...heading off to Northwestern University ---far away from Oceanside, California-- Southern Calif.

At the beginning of the novel-Nadia is holding in her sadness about her mother's deathwhich leads to her involvement with Luke. When he pays for her abortion but then doesn't show up at the clinic to drive her home - as planned - on the day of the procedure....

I imagined the the sadness, pain, (physical and emotional), and shame, she must have been feeling. And so alone in the world.

After High School Nadia becomes friends with Aubrey Evans. The story follows Nadia, Aubrey, Luke -- each connected and each dealing with universal themes: pain, loss, shame, hopes, love, and dreams.

The Church ladies - older mothers - give a narrative voice in certain chapters --giving their perspective during their prayer group about the younger generation.

This novel is an interesting look into the modern African American community....in Southern California- off to College in Michigan -- back to Los Angeles to care for Nadia's sick father.

Church community - education values - friendship - changes in styles of mothering, 'women's self discovery of self - and searching for understanding of one's mother.

There are many types of mothers in this novel as their are women.

"Anyone knows a church is only as good as it's women, and when we all passed on to glory, who would hold up this church? Serve on the auxiliaries board? Organize the Women of Worth conferences? Hand out food baskets during Christmas? We look to the future and saw long banquet tables growing dusty in the basement, the women's Bible studies emptied, assuming these girls didn't turn the meeting room into a disco hall".

Congrats to Britt Bennett on her debut novel. Thanks for expanding my admiration of modern Black women in America.

karen says

a mother's day float!!! for mothers!!!

i saw a comment the other day on a friend's review that was both amusing and galling:

Dammit! I can't trust the reviews of people who were given the item for free! Believe it or not, you're predisposed to like the product.

so before i get to the review part, let me just say that - yes, i did get this book for free, but that didn't predispose me to like the product (as i shudder at the word "product" being used to describe a book). yes, i am beyond grateful that i was given the opportunity to read this, since i'd *already* had it on my to-read shelf, but it's been out for months - i could also have been given "the item" for free by my local library. or, since it is a hardcover, i could have borrowed it for free from work. i get free books all the time - as gifts, as review copies from authors or publishers or on the free shelves at work, as people move out of my building and leave 'em on the radiator in the foyer, and although i am always grateful for freebies, i don't love them all or feel guilted into gratitude-uprating. and i don't think many other people do, either. most true book-folk bleed integrity, and it's pretty clear when a reviewer is genuinely enthusiastic about a book.

however, although i don't uprate-for-freebies, i do have a blanket tendency towards uprating because my pesky readers' advisory training has broadened my critical assessment faculties from "is this a good book to me?" to "can i identify the target audience for this book?" so a lot of books that are three-and-a-half stars for ME are shunted into four-star land because i know the book has an audience, even if it's not my particular favorite. and that's what reviews are for. my star ratings are slippery, inconsistent things, but the review space is where i can go into greater detail about what worked, what didn't, and who this book is "for." i don't get paid for my opinions or my reviews (but if someone wants to give me a job, i'm all ears!); i write them in order to help myself solidify my reaction, to have a record of my reading experience, to understand the book's appeal for others, and if my review either makes someone want to read the book or lets them know that it is not a book they would enjoy, that's all extra gravy.

all of that to say that i loved this book.

objectively, it's a really well-written debut novel. subjectively, it's got many plot points to which i could relate, not the least of which was, like nadia, growing up in a gossipy church-town and losing my mother to suicide at seventeen. so, yeah - there was a particular resonance for me that would have occurred even if i had shelled out the 26 bucks.

i can't think of anything i *didn't* like about it.

- the writing is confident and assured without being showy; without that self-conscious impulse first-timers often have to be impressive and "literary." there were so many perfect lines, observations, quiet truisms - i'd planned to use many pull-quotes, but it soon became impossible to even choose among them. but here, i will give you ONE:

Most of the milestones in a woman's life were accompanied by pain, like her first time having sex or birthing a child. For men, it was all orgasms and champagne.

- all of the characters are nuanced; mostly sympathetic, but capable of doing really selfishly shitty things the way we all are, so they come across as humans instead of plot-vehicles.

- the ending showed remarkable restraint and maturity for a debut; there's no tidy authorial bow wrapping everything just so.

- it's funny and smart and thoughtful and honest and sad and just ... smooth. she's an excellent storyteller, and it never feels overwritten or message-laden. although it's about death and abortion and crushed dreams and betrayal and abuse and all the different ways a person can be lonely or unmoored, it's not at all bleak,

which is an accomplishment unto itself.

so yeah, i got a book for free. and i loved it. because it's a damn easy book to love.

here's something awesome - i'd been seeing these book-box subscriptions around the interwebz, where you pay to get surprise boxes of books and other treats mailed to you a couple of times a year, and i thought - 'when i start making money and my cat is cured of expensive cancers, this is how i will spend my riches.'

and then - LO - i was offered a free literary fiction box from pagehabit:

<https://pagehabit.com/quarterly/liter...>

and it is so freaking awesome!

even maggie wants to check it out:

it has books and a mug and some tea and a sticker! the "main" book is bristling with post-it notes annotated by the author:

where you will learn fun facts about the book:

i am super-thrilled because i wanted to read this one really badly, and i am also looking forward to reading the two titles brit bennett selected to be friends with her book, although me and sula have some bad blood between us, because of the time a copy tried to kill me. more on that later.

this was indeed

and maggie's glad i took everything out of the box so she could have a new bed, even though this one is a pretty tight squeeze:

still reading and loving this one, but i wanted to drop my GRATITUDE! you people with money should get yourself a subscription. i love this idea so much!

come to my blog!

Roxane says

The Mothers is an outstanding, engaging debut novel. The story follows two teenagers, Nadia and Luke, who fall in love as teenagers and how they come together and fall apart over the years. This is also a novel about a community and a church community and a friendship between Nadia and her best friend Aubrey, and the sorrows of motherless girls. I loved the voice and the storytelling and how Bennett is able to hold the story she wants to tell together over the course of a decade. The one part of the novel that didn't work for me was the collective voice, used throughout the novel, to represent "the mothers" of the Upper Room church community. I could see what the writer was going for but the conceit felt really forced most of the time, like it was a meta narrative being forced onto a story that could stand all on its own. This is going to be one of the best books published this year and is one you're going to want to read. Out in October.

Hannah Greendale says

[Click here](#) to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

Nadia Turner is introduced to unimaginable grief as a teenager. None of the vices she turns to as coping mechanisms have any real consequence, until her dalliance with the pastor's son, Luke Sheppard, forces her to make a difficult decision. The byproduct of their liaison is something Nadia keeps to herself, even withholding it from her best friend, Aubrey Evans. But the secret follows Nadia into adulthood, ultimately ensnaring Luke, Aubrey, and Nadia in a distressing game of "What if?"

Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey's stories are relayed by the Mothers - a group of elderly woman who run the prayer circle at the Upper Room Church. They hover above the story like sages, imparting divine wisdom to readers while passing judgment on the characters. Their presence gives the story a personal, intimate quality, as if the reader were gossiping with old friends on a lazy Sunday afternoon.

We don't think of ourselves as "prayer warriors." A man must've come up with that term - men think anything difficult is war. But prayer is more delicate than battle, especially intercessory prayer.

If Nadia Turner had asked, we would've warned her to stay away from him.

Wisdom is abundant in *The Mothers*. It sprouts like spring blossoms in rich soil throughout the entire book:

[He] had seen her naked - he had slipped inside her own body - but somehow, his seeing her afraid was an intimacy she could not bear.

Black boys couldn't afford to be reckless, she had tried to tell him. Reckless white boys became politicians and bankers, reckless black boys became dead.

Poorness never left you, she told him. It was a hunger that embedded itself into your bones. It starved you, even when you were full.

Primary characters are complex and multifaceted. New characters are introduced seamlessly and fall into easy conversation with protagonists. There's a natural, authentic flow to the dialogue, whether characters have just met or have known each other for years. Descriptions of character flaws or virtues are particularly sublime.

[She] was the type of person who'd rather do something herself than show you how. (The type who would prefer to give a man a fish not only because she could catch a better one herself, but because she felt important being the only thing standing between that man and starvation.)

The more time he spent around her, the more he realized how rarely he thought anybody else was actually good. Nice, maybe, but niceness was something anyone could be, whether they meant it or not. But goodness was another thing altogether.

Many similarities are shared between *The Mothers* and *Sula* by Tony Morrison. Two girls who are childhood friends grow up in the same tight-knit community. Who they become as adults hinges on their family histories. And, as young women, they each make decisions that affect their position in the community - one choosing to adhere to the status quo and being met with warm acceptance; the other choosing to break with convention and suffering the ramifications for years.

The Mothers questions whether decisions made in our youth must haunt us forever and asks if we can break free from the communities that parented us, tackling both questions through an engaging and poignant narrative. This book is a stunning debut novel from a promising new talent.

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My deepest gratitude to Quarterly.co for providing a free Literary Box with a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Quarterly.co's Literary Box comes with bookish goodies, a feature book, and two additional books selected by the author of the feature novel.

What makes the Literary Box special are the notes written by the author of the feature book. These notes give readers unique insights into the book that only the author would know.

Erin ? *Proud Book Hoarder* says

“The weight of what has been lost is always heavier than what remains.”

A beautiful book with a real soul at its center, *The Mothers* is unlike anything I've read before. It starts with a teenager recovering from the loss of her mother's suicide, who then does the desperate and ends her own baby's life through an abortion. The book is surprisingly layered as it touches upon the girl's life as she grows up, the father's life as he grows and mourns for his child and his youth, and the best friend who they ultimately kept in the dark for so long. Above this its about growth and not living up to potential. Its about acceptance but grief overshadowing everything forever. Its about moving on but staying behind.

I read so many dramas where cheap gimmicks are used for heartstring tugs, but this isn't it. This is realism and soul and heart. It doesn't shy away from giving the main character selfish traits that touch everything she touches. It doesn't shy away from the grim realities of her mourning father, or the underachievements of Lucas, who wished to be so much more. It doesn't save unrealistic purity for a pure-hearted friend. Really it's life, and life is unfair and unkind and doesn't discriminate.

That said, it's not just a depressing ride, but a human character study. There is a degree and form of

happiness in the living of their lives. They must live with the past and how it haunts but that doesn't mean the same decision wouldn't have been made again.

Beautifully written and powerfully prosed, the story is unique again when it has older mothers and women of the church, the 'Upper Room' begin sections with musings and reflections. They are in a way biddy bodies who gossip and wonder, but they are also wise and kind and filled with wonder of life even though a lot of it has passed them by. The book isn't just about two teenagers kids and their choices - it's about adults and life and growth and self-reflection.

I didn't care much for the main character because her selfishness in a few situations was repulsive, but I liked the author painting a picture of a realistic person. People like that exist everywhere, so it's good to see their real stories. I liked how the author later acknowledges grief men feel if their children are killed through abortion too, and it wasn't just shied over and made to be only about women power, hear me roar kind of stuff. He wasn't made to be blameless in all certainly, but he was made realistic too and nothing would work out better than that.

Recommended for everyone because it makes you think, it makes you wonder, and it makes you feel - but genuinely feel, not cheesy and contrived dramas with predictable formulas that only recycle the tried and true that brings forth emotional mimicking instead of genuine emotional *living*.

I was touched by how the author creatively tied in the mother connection to the main character. Her mother may have ended it because she could never be happy with the joys she had, but the daughter was the same in so many ways. Both were wild spirits who were constantly fleeting from one thing to the next. The mother may not have been able to go to colleges of her dreams and travel, but it shows that it was not the things that 'held her back' that kept her from ever feeling whole.

An added touch of fun was I read this through a book box subscription. Literary Subscription box sent me this and two other books for review, as well as goodies inside. The author included tons of stickies explaining different names, places, and inspirations. It made it feel like I was reading the book while randomly calling up the author to chat with them about random things when I read them.

Cheri says

The mothers are those from the Upper Room, the older women who stand over their congregation, sometimes quietly sitting back, taking note of the changes, the moods, of those whose bodies are in the pews and whose minds are not. They sit in judgment, handing out opinions, conclusions, decisions and verdicts on who should be spending less time carousing and more time serving others. They've seen it all in all their years, there's no surprising them, but it doesn't stop them from singing out a little story now and then, some tale that might begin with "now you didn't hear it from me, but..."

"If we laid all our lives toes to heel, we were born before the Depression, the Civil War, even America itself. In all that living, we have known men. Oh girl, we have known littlebit love. That littlebit of honey left in an empty jar that traps the sweetness in your mouth long enough to mask your hunger. We have run tongues over teeth to savor that last littlebit as long as we could, and in all our living, nothing has starved us more."

Nadia Turner is seventeen the year her mother kills herself, leaving herself and her father behind with an ever-changing, never-ending list of unanswered questions which all boiled down to one: Why?

"Her father propped his sadness on a pew, but she put her sad in places no one could see."

Nadia's plans include college, a degree, a life away from the place where her mother's ghost is in the sympathetic eyes of everyone, in the familiar places where they walked together, all she hears now is the endless refrain of "why?" with every step. Alcohol and sex can only offer her momentary diversions, but a chance to be somewhere new, different, un-haunted by her mother's un-presence, and she thinks maybe then, there, that she can breathe again. Live again. Think of other thoughts again.

"Since then, the girl had earned a wild reputation – she was young and scared and trying to hide her scared in her prettiness. And she was pretty, beautiful even, with amber skin, silky long hair, and eyes swirled brown and gray and gold. Like most girls, she'd already learned that pretty exposes you and pretty hides you and like most girls, she hadn't yet learned how to navigate the difference. So we heard all about her sojourns across the border to dance clubs in Tijuana, the water bottle she carried around Oceanside High filled with vodka, the Saturdays she spent on base playing pool with Marines, nights that ended with her heels pressed against some man's foggy window. Just tales, maybe, except for one we now know is true: she spent her senior year of high school rolling around in bed with Luke Sheppard and come springtime, his baby was growing inside her."

Decisions must be made. Nadia knows what she's always wanted for herself, how can she possibly do that with a child? She knows that's not possible.

Through the months that follow, Nadia and Luke's relationship changes, pulling away from each other, and Nadia finds some comfort in the friendship of a girl she only vaguely knows from church. Quiet and shy Aubrey, the girl who wears a chastity ring, their common ground being the lack of a mother in each of their lives, Aubrey's mother having chosen her latest boyfriend over her daughter. Through Nadia, Aubrey comes out of her self-protective bubble a little, gains a little self-confidence, and relaxes enough that she finds herself smitten with Luke Sheppard.

I loved this story from the very first pages. I smiled when I read the first paragraph, knowing already that I would love this. And while I would have likely read this eventually, when I was contacted by Quarterly, offering me a sample box of their latest selection, "The Mothers," I agreed to try it out. I knew I would not be able to read it right away, but I was intrigued by how they would "add value" to the featured book. When it arrived, aside from "The Mothers," it included Toni Morrison's "Sula" and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists" in addition to a few extra goodies including a mug and some literary tea (Jane Eyre). Throughout the pages of "The Mothers" are post-it notes, handwritten by Brit Bennett, some of her thoughts, background information, musings. An appreciated touch, giving this novel that already felt so very personal an extra personal touch. It really added an extra facet for me, an idea of what was going through her mind when she wrote this. It reminded me of sitting on the porch with my aunt, or my godmother, where we would take turns reading and discussing the book we were reading – and those conversations always included how they related to these stories, how it reminded them of this or that. That personal touch, a thought that added some new insight.

Brit Bennett began writing this novel when she was seventeen, herself – the same age as Nadia. Ms. Bennett, herself, grew up in Oceanside, with big plans for her future. I'd say that with this debut novel, her future looks big and bright.

Will Byrnes says

A girl nowadays has to get nice and close to tell if her man ain't shit and by then it might be too late. We were girls once. It's exciting, loving someone who can never love you back.

Freeing, in its own way. No shame in loving an aint-shit man, long as you get it out of your system good and early. A tragic woman hooks into an aint-shit man, or worse, lets him hook into her. He will drag her until he tires. He will climb atop her shoulders and her body will sag from the weight of loving him.

It does not matter where you are planted. How can you grow straight and strong if some of your deepest roots have been ripped out? If the cords that nurture are cut before completing their mission? *The Mothers* is a story of absence, a tale based on what is not there, and secrets about what is. Nadia Turner is a pretty seventeen-year-old, living in Oceanside, California with her father. For reasons that are never made entirely clear, her mother killed herself. Dad turned inward and to their church for solace or distraction. Nadia sought comfort elsewhere, with Luke Shepherd, the pastor's handsome son, which led to her becoming pregnant.

Brit Bennett - from her site

Oceanside has a small town feel, made even more so by the Greek chorus narrators, the elder mothers of Upper Room, the church that Nadia and her father attend. Most chapters begin with "the mothers" offering observations based on their long experience. The book opens with one of the best of these:

All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season. But we didn't. We shared this sour secret, a secret that began the Spring Nadia Turner got knocked up...

The mothers feel somewhat spectral, but some of them get involved in very material ways throughout the story.

Bennett's book was conceived from some of her adolescent concerns:

In a lot of ways, I was writing in the direction of my fears. When I was younger, one of the worst things I could have done was to get pregnant. Another thing that really scared me was the idea of losing my mother - from the Vogue interview

The core plot structure is a romantic triangle. Nadia is smitten with Luke, although he shows himself to be something less than a beacon of light. She becomes close friends with another young woman who is also working at the church. Aubrey is the darling of the pastor's wife, a devoted Christian who wears a chastity ring. She has had a rough go of it, though, living with an older half-sister, as the latest in her mother's seemingly endless string of loser boyfriends has made life at home intolerable. As college-bound Nadia moves on and up, Aubrey and Luke become involved. But there is still a spark between Nadia and Luke, and things get complicated.

Secrets abound. Why did Elise Turner kill herself? Nadia's abortion is known to a few, but is kept hidden from most, for diverse reasons. Affairs must, by their nature, take place out of sight. Aubrey keeps some pretty serious secrets of her own. Sometimes, when secrets are revealed, the results are extreme.

And I thought the book was going to take place just in one summer. But then as I got older, I realized something obvious—that the coming-of-age process doesn't happen so neatly. The book, I think, is about this central question of how girls grow into women when the female figures who are supposed to usher you into womanhood aren't there. - from the Vogue interview

Absence is profound. When Nadia's mother killed herself she took a huge piece of her daughter with her.

Coping with that deep loss is core to Nadia's personality and struggles. Compounding the loss of her mother, Nadia's father retreats into himself, becoming the most minimal sort of father. Aubrey also suffers from the loss of *her* mother. Although she is alive, Mom remains an absentee part of her life. Both Nadia and Luke contend with feelings about the abortion over the years, wondering what their lives might have become if they had raised a baby. While much of the what-iffing centers on the abortion, other people's forked roads are considered as well. What if they had done this instead of that? Made that choice instead of the one they made. What might their lives look like? What might Nadia's life have looked like if her mother had lived? What might her mother's life had been if she had chosen to live it?

Community clearly figures large here, both in a positive and a negative way. This is communicated through the church, where people can be wonderfully supportive, but also spiteful and malicious. The mothers of the title refers not just to the church elders, but to Nadia and later Aubrey, and to their mothers as well. And Luke's mother (a mama grizzly if there ever was one) too, for that matter.

The book had a multi-year gestation.

I grew up with this book. I started writing it when I was about 17 or 18, so either in college or about to go to college—and then started working on it more seriously in college and then grad school. So when I started writing *The Mothers*, I was the same age the characters were. I grew up as the characters stayed the same. - from the Jezebel interview

There is a richness of language to this book that is surprising given the tender age of the author. Yet, there is such an ear for sound and rhythm, the cadence of language, and the beauty. Many times I imagined the dialogue being spoken on a stage, and wondered if parts were born there. Bennett has a story-teller's ability to pull readers in, as if by a campfire on a warm evening. "Gather round, come on now, in closer. That's right. Settle. Everyone comfy? Ok? I've got a story here I think you'll want to hear." And then she begins, "We didn't believe when we first heard, because you know how church folk can gossip..." All eyes fix on her, and thought of all else floats up into the night, competing for air space with fireflies, mosquitoes, and wafting smoke from the blaze. Bennett's voice swaddles us in the sound of story, in her portraits of people, and we fly with her through her realm. It is a journey worth making.

Published - October 11, 2016

Review posted - February 17, 2017

=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, Twitter, FB and Instagram pages

I came by this book in an unusual way. I was contacted by Quarterly re their Literary Box. Each quarter they feature a new author, who curates the box contents. This would be a primary book, annotated by the author/curator. There were about (I say "about" because I have a tendency to lose things, so the number may be a touch higher) eighteen 3"x3" post-it notes in the book intended to appear to be in the author's hand, offering bits of background on diverse elements of the novel. I was reminded of pop-up videos. This was wonderful. I wish all books had such additions. The author selects two other books to be included in the box and there is a bit of non-book extra as well. In this case a mug and some tea. Despite it being February when this review was posted, this box was sent to subscribers for October 2016. I received mine in mid-January 2017. Overall, the wonderfulness of the primary book aside, I thought this was a delightful package. If you want to check out their past literary boxes, adult and YA, or other stuff, you might try here. And no, no one asked me to make nice. Not being a presidential counselor, I can do this.

Interviews

-----Brit Bennett on Her Buzzed-About Debut Novel, *The Mothers* - 9/21/16 – Vogue – by Megan O’Grady
-----An Interview With Brit Bennett About 'Good White People' and Her Debut Novel *The Mothers* - 4/14/16 – Jezebel – by Jia Tolentino

Odetta singing Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

Suzanne Leopold says

The story centers around three young adults growing up in Southern California.

Nadia Turner is a seventeen year old senior in high school. She has been accepted to study at the University of Michigan. She is grieving the death of her mother who committed suicide six months ago. Nadia becomes involved with twenty-one year old Luke Sheppard. He is the son of the preacher at the local chapel. They have a secret romance, and Nadia finds herself pregnant. During employment at the local chapel, Aubrey Evans becomes Nadia’s best friend. She has moved to the area to live with her sister, leaving behind a difficult family situation. Nadia and Aubrey share a common motherless bond. We follow their relationship from the adolescent years to adulthood. This wonderful novel explores friendships, secrets, loss and shame.

The book is narrated in part by the elderly women, or “mothers” of the church. These women keep track of the gossip from the Upper Room Chapel where these families congregate.

The Mothers is a story about people and how life happens while we are living it. A main point that I took away from the book is that when we withhold information, feelings can get hurt and damage the relationships we cherish. Decisions or errors that we make in the formative years can creep up on us later in life. We aren’t without flaws.

I did not want to put the book down, so the laundry in my house did not get folded for a few days. This is a debut novel. I am thrilled that another novel is in the works.

Great news-movie development news <https://www.facebook.com/suzyapproved...>

Maxwell says

There's no denying that Brit Bennett can craft a great sentence. She's able to evoke so much emotion in a turn of phrase. But those moments are few and far between in this story of hard decisions, lifelong consequences, and the unbreakable bonds that humans share.

I felt like this book had a lot of melodrama; many scenes don't feel authentic. I can see Bennett working behind the scenes, which doesn't give me much confidence as a reader. However, when she gets it right—wow, she hits the bullseye. There were a few passages I made note of because of how expertly Bennett was able to articulate a feeling, a thought, a passing moment between two characters. For that and the fact that this is her debut novel, I am impressed.

And the function of *The Mothers* in the story as a sort of omnipotent narrator was interesting. I hadn't read much like it before, though it sort of drew on the Greek chorus idea. I liked it, but it might have been a tad

overdone.

Nevertheless, a beautifully written story (though a slightly forgettable plot) with glimmering moments that show promise for Bennett's future. I will definitely read whatever she writes next. **3.5 stars**

Book Riot Community says

I don't even know what to say about this book. It made me feel all the things. It's about three people—Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey—but mostly Nadia. It's about how our choices affect us, and how our secrets can define us if we let them. It's about growing up in a tight knit community, and the pressures and the judgements that can go along with that. It's about how grief and pain mess us up and what can happen when we try to leave it behind. *The Mothers* is my favourite kind of book—a story about people, about life. It's so beautiful and poignant in its exploration of humanity in the microcosm that are these characters. I absolutely devoured this book.

—Beth O'Brien

from The Best Books We Read In March 2017: <http://bookriot.com/2017/04/04/riot-r...>

I feel like I should have drawn my dangers of listening to audiobooks for the car in addition to the gym, because I found myself driving around and fighting back tears the whole time I listened to this book. (Don't audiobook and drive if the book gives you FEELS. I cried in a grocery store parking lot listening to this book.) Bennett perfectly captured painful coming-of-age moments for people who come from screwed-up families, especially the families that seem normal on the outside and especially especially what happens when you're a kid left with a mystery as to how things went so horribly wrong in the first place. Her prose is accessible and beautiful and rings of so much truth that it's almost too much to take at times. I'm glad I read this.

— Susie Rodarme

from The Best Books We Read In January 2017: <http://bookriot.com/2017/02/01/riot-r...>

I resisted this book for a while because of its title: I'm not a mother, likely never will be, and I'm not a massive fan of fictional motherhood. But I went to hear Brit Bennett read and speak at Politics and Prose, my local bookstore, and I couldn't help myself. And it turns out that, while motherhood is definitely a theme, the mothers in question are the church mothers — the older ladies who watch the unfolding drama between the Pastor's son and his girlfriend and comment on it with a wonderfully executed voice that really drew me in. This novel dealt with the topic of abortion with nuance and empathy, which is both interesting and important. It was wonderful, too, to read about a very recognisable church community in literary fiction — especially where the members of that community are portrayed as complex and three dimensional, neither angels nor demons but, quite simply, human. Though she's still depressingly young, Brit Bennett worked on his novel for many years, and it's definitely paid off. This is my favourite book not just of the month but also of the year.

— Claire Handscombe

from The Best Books We Read In December 2016: <http://bookriot.com/2017/01/03/riot-r...>

I'm so obsessed with this book and so glad I read it and didn't let it fall back on my TBR. It was quick and satisfying read, and it's written very elegantly. Though it tackles topics that could easily be handled preachily, they never come off that way. It never feels as if judgment is being passed on anyone, which is very important to me in narratives about abortion and religion. The characters are simply living and we're just watching them do it.

—Chelsea Hensley

from The Best Books We Read In October 2016: <http://bookriot.com/2016/10/31/riot-r...>

This book is something special: sage and sad and spectacular. Focused on a church that acts as both center and centrifuge for a black Southern California community, *The Mothers* follows a trio of young people as they make decisions about their future and live in the aftermath of those choices. The structure and plotting are genius, letting you dive deep into a particular character at some points and slide between them, in fragments and fractures, at others. The book is narrated by the church mothers, elderly women who see all (and have seen it all, as their periodic reports from their century of black womanhood make clear), a conceit that works so well it hurts. When I wrote a recent post on books about finding your place in the world, I hadn't read *The Mothers*. If I had, it would have featured grandly among those other fantastic titles. This is a book about how the choices you make, and those made for you, shape the lovely, hopeful tragedy of your life. *

— Derek Attig

from The Best Books We Read In May 2016: <http://bookriot.com/2016/06/01/riot-r...>

Jill says

It's never easy for me to be the lone dissenting voice in a chorus of much more respected reviewers who have lauded *The Mothers* as one of the finest books of 2016. Yet for me, this debut novel is a classic example of "the emperor has no clothes."

The book focuses on three teens: Nadia, whose mother killed herself for unknown reasons, her boyfriend Luke, and her best friend Aubrey who is pious and estranged from her own mother. The title of the book is very apt, because this book deals with all kinds of mothers: mothers who left, mothers who were left, wannabe mothers, and a Greek chorus of older church-going mothers who judgmentally comment on the goings-on in the community.

The Greek chorus, using the third person “we”, has been used successfully by Jeffrey Eugenides in *Virgin Suicides* and in Joshua Ferris’ *Then We Came to the End*, among others. When used effectively – as it is here – it’s a powerful tool. And there’s no doubt that Brit Bennett can tell a good story.

The premise of that story is found in a blurb on her book jacket –“must we always live in servitude to the decisions of our youngest selves, and to the communities that have parented us.” To buy into that premise, as presented by Ms. Bennett, we must believe this: that an abortion, at age 17, is so extraordinarily emotionally traumatic that it overshadows future accomplishments and relationships and causes someone to act compulsively enough to betray a sister-of-the-heart and one’s own deeply-held values.

One example: here's Nadia, ruminating obsessively about the fetus she aborted. "Baby, no longer a baby, now a toddler, reaching and grabbing. Pulling at her earrings until she unhooks his chubby fingers. Baby hungry always for her face. Baby growing into a child, learning words, rhyming -at words from a car seat on the way to school..." And here's Luke, speaking to Nadia: "Dave (his counselor) says he's in heaven right now. And your mom's holding him."

I didn't buy it (for the record, my own beliefs are both pro-life and pro-choice, which are not separate). On a gut level, I did not understand Nadia's inability to let go of Luke, despite his abominable behavior following her abortion and the many circumstances that intervened. I did not believe in Luke's transformation and his eventual connection to Aubrey. I do not believe that we are hostage to our pasts.

I have struggled with this question: did my own biases color my reading of *The Mothers*? It's a fair question, but I think not. If the novel were stronger, it might have taken me out of my own belief system and put me right into the head of the main characters. (One example of this happening was *Salvage the Bones*. That book has, at its core, pit-bull fighting, which I thoroughly despise. Yet the writing was so strong that I could understand the characters' motivations, something I never thought I would ever be able to do).

So here's what the crux of it is for me: I did not believe the characters were quite nuanced enough nor did I buy into their motivations. I also thought that some of the plot twists were very predictable (hmmm...two best friends and a boy. Wonder if there will be a triangle relationship?) Again, I am an outlier in my reactions to *The Mothers* and I don't for a minute think that my own reading experience is or should be the definitive one. 2.50 stars.

Diane S ? says

The entwined lives of three teens in an African American community in Southern, California. Nadia, whose mother recently committed suicide and Aubrey, whose mother has chosen her boyfriend over her, and Luke, the pastor's son. Personal demons, young love, and growing up to find you still long for that which you left behind. A decision impossible to take back but that will fill Nadia with regret.. the Upper Room chapel and the Mothers, those older church ladies, who seem to see and know everything. Gossip and opinions, they and Nadia are our narrators.

I belong to a subscription service called Quarterly and every three months an author curates the box. Brit Bennett was the curator for this box and she included personal notes on stickies, placed in various places in the book. Greatly added to my reading experience as she explains where she got some of her ideas, some of her thoughts when writing. She based our narrators, the mothers, on the most judgmental, people she knew. If you read the book you will see what a great job she did.

I was thoroughly drawn into this story, it felt so identifiable, so realistic and so true. The mistakes we make when we are young are sometimes hard to forget, fill us with regret, a longing to go back and change things. Of course we can't, we must learn to move forward, as do the three young people in this novel. Quite a touching and memorable first novel.

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

Nadia Turner is a seventeen year old girl. She recently lost her mother to suicide (Not a spoiler) and is completely grief stricken. She is a beautiful, super smart girl who is fast tracked to college and a better life. Then she starts slipping and seeing the Pastor's son. You know they say those things about the preacher's kid for a reason don't you?

Preacher's kid Lucas is the All-American kid. Former football star that got hurt that is now living with Mommy and Daddy working at a restaurant. He doesn't want anyone to know about their relationship. Because well you know...

Things happen, they end up apart because of super secret-secrets. Nadia becomes best friends before she heads off to college with the most church-going girl in town.

Then their stories all entwine. I want to say more about this book but I'm afraid of going spoilery and will tape duct tape over my mouth. (But would totally love to discuss this one in spoilers in the comment section) Sorta like the "Church Mothers" in this book discuss the goings on in these peoples lives.

Now I will discuss how I felt about the book. First the bad. Since I eat dessert first.

I liked Nadia when she was a teenager. That stuff wore off fast though. I didn't really like any of these characters enough to give two rats about what happened to them. I was sorta cheering for the worst. (Don't get all excited-I usually love stories about hateful, awful characters.)

Then the dragging on...so much un-needed whiny stuff happening. Snooze button hit about five times.

Then the good. I did like the first half of the book. I was hoping for so much more. Then it fizzled. One thing that was really pretty cool about my copy of the book was the little sticky notes stuck throughout the book giving the authors insights and reasoning at certain passages. Yes, please to this.

2.5 stars.

Booksource: I was gifted this book from Quarterly Co. I have to admit that this was probably the most impressive subscription box that I have ever received. I get several because I'm also a makeup addict. Just look at the awesomeness...(There was tea also..but someone who looks like me drank it right away)
