

'The Vanishing Half'

By **Moira Macdonald**
The Seattle Times

Brit Bennett is intrigued by performance, and her bestselling 2020 novel "The Vanishing Half" features a masterful one at its center: Stella, a light-skinned Black woman, leaves her small Louisiana town in the 1950s to begin a new life in which she passes as white. It's a performance that becomes all-encompassing for her; Stella abandons her mother, her identical twin sister, Desiree, and her past. "But for all Desiree knew," the book's narrator muses, "Stella had lived white for half her life now, and maybe acting for that long ceased to be acting altogether. Maybe pretending to be white eventually made it so."

In a telephone interview from her New York home, Bennett spoke of the layers in her book. "I found that aspect of passing to be really fascinating," she said. An element of race, or any type of identity, she said, is performance — "how we perform it to other people, how we read the performances of others."

Other characters in the book

— such as Stella's daughter, who becomes an actor — perform in other ways, allowing Bennett to explore "what does it mean when the performance begins to feel real. ... So much of Stella's journey is watching her going from very consciously performing when she was young to where she ends up, where the performance has kind of taken over." Reading Nella Larsen's novel "Passing" in college — a 1929 tale of two biracial friends, one of whom chooses to pass for white — inspired her, as did the idea of exploring the sometimes claustrophobic closeness that can happen between sisters.

"The Vanishing Half" is Bennett's second novel, and it came with high expectations. Bennett's acclaimed debut, the coming-of-age tale "The Mothers," was published in 2016; its author, then a recent graduate of Stanford University and the University of Michigan's Master of Fine Arts program, was only 26. Long before the publication of "The Mothers," however, Bennett had begun work on "The Vanishing Half," wanting to write a book that followed characters through a larger period

of their lives. It was a very different experience — for the second book, she had an editor and an agent — but the author was grateful to have started the book with no external pressure.

Bennett doesn't outline her novels; she said she likes to see where the writing process takes her. "The Vanishing Half" changed substantially during the four or five years of its birth. Initially, she thought it'd be a very clean, neat story: half from the perspective from one twin, half from another.

"I think for me, a lot of the process of writing this book was learning how to divorce myself from what I originally thought the book might be, and learning to follow all of the characters who interested me, who surprised me when they entered the story, and I wanted to follow them for a little bit of time — just allowing myself to go where I was most interested."

The book became a tale of mothers and daughters — Desiree's daughter Jude, a very dark-skinned young woman eager to escape that small town; Stella's daughter Kennedy, blond and



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privileged and perpetually disappearing into a role. And the men in their lives intrigued Bennett as well: Reese, a trans man in a complicated but loving relationship with Jude; Early, a bounty hunter distracted from his assignment by his attraction to Desiree; Stella's husband, Blake, formerly her boss, who has no idea what secret his wife holds.

Published in June 2020, "The Vanishing Half" was an immediate bestseller, emerging at a time when readers were especially hungry for novels of racial identity. "You never can predict the context that will be surrounding your book!" Bennett said.

She was surprised that so many readers supported the book during the pandemic.

"I didn't know if people were going to want to read books or be able to buy books, or if bookstores would be open," she said. "I really did not know what to expect." But she was heartened to find that books were "pandemic-proof media." While movies, concerts, theater and other art forms were on hold, "we could still buy books, they're shelf-stable, you can read them and feel like you're connecting to others. ... One of the things that's been surprising to me about publishing books is the realization of not only how much people do read but how deeply they care about books. People are really turning to books as a way to communicate with their friends and their families."

Another unexpected but welcome development was the acquisition of "The Vanishing Half" (in a highly competitive rights auction) by HBO for a limited series. Playwrights Aziza Barnes ("BLKS") and Jeremy O. Harris ("Slave Play") have signed on as writers and executive producers; Issa Rae (HBO's "Insecure") is also among the producers. The scripts are currently in development.

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