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About the Author

Nadine Pinede is a poet, author, editor, translator, and education consultant. The daughter of Haitian immigrants, she is a Harvard graduate and the first Rhodes Scholar of Haitian descent. She earned her MFA in fiction and poetry and her doctorate in philosophy of education. Her fiction appears in *Haiti Noir*, edited by Edwidge Danticat, and her Pushcart Prize–nominated poetry has been widely anthologized. Nadine Pinede lives on the edge of a primeval beech forest with her husband, two cats, and a dog.

About the Book

Sixteen-year-old Lucille hopes to one day open a school alongside her best friend where girls just like them can learn what it means to be Haitian: to learn from the mountains and the forests around them, to carve, to sew, to draw, and to sing the songs of the Mapou, the sacred trees that dot the island nation. But when her friend vanishes without a trace, a dream—a gift from the Mapou—tells Lucille to go to her village’s section chief, the local face of law, order, and corruption, which puts her life and her family’s at risk.

Forced to flee her home, Lucille takes a servant post with a wealthy Haitian woman from society’s elite in Port-au-Prince. Despite a warning to avoid him, she falls in love with her employer’s son. But when their relationship is found out, she must leave again—this time banished to another city to work for a visiting American writer and academic conducting fieldwork in Haiti. While Lucille’s new employer studies vodou and works on the novel that will become *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Lucille risks losing everything she cares about—and any chance of seeing her best friend again—as she fights to save their lives and secure her future in this novel in verse with the racing heart of a thriller.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.



Discussion Questions

Parts One and Two: Lakay and Lavil

1. Give three examples of things Lucille and Fifina like to do together or talk about. How do these activities and topics help their friendship grow?
2. Why do you think the Sisters have forbidden Lucille and Fifina from going to the cave their mothers went to?
3. The poem “The Outside Wife” (pages 36–42) ends with a prayer; why? What is Lucille asking for?
4. Who are Lucille’s allies as she tracks down the people who cut down her Mapou tree? Do you think her actions are brave or foolish? Who in the book agrees with you, and what reasoning do they offer?
5. Note three things that are different about life in the big city through Lucille’s eyes. Is she 100 percent happy to be living in this new environment?
6. What kinds of projects is the Women’s League working on? Why is Lucille so interested in their work?
7. What languages does Oreste study in school? How does he feel about that, and why does he feel that way? Is Lucille surprised by his criticisms? Why? In what other ways does his education differ from Lucille’s? Why do these differences exist?
8. Why is Cousin Phebus so concerned about Lucille’s interest in Oreste? How does she express her concern, and do you think Lucille gets the message?
9. What are the two names for the weed Oreste shows to Lucille in the poem “Our Inside Names” (pages 165–168)? What feelings do you get from each name? How does their discussion of plant names relate to them? What are Lucille’s and Oreste’s inside names? What other names does each character have, and how does each name make them feel? Why do they feel that way?
10. As Lucille and Oreste get to know each other better, what brings them together despite their differences of class and upbringing?
11. What is the meaning of the phrase “girl in the shadows,” and how does Lucille feel about it?
12. What specifically does Lucille admire about Katherine Dunham? Why is she watching Ms. Dunham and the other guests so closely during Madame Ovide’s special dinner party? Who are some of the other guests, and which one would you be most excited to meet? Why?



13. What connections does Oreste make between what is happening in Haiti and in Europe when he joins the dinner table conversation? What does this tell us about Oreste? Why is Madame Ovide surprised that her son is interested in the New Negro movement of Harlem?
14. Later, why is it bittersweet for Lucille to hear Madame Ovide read her son's letter from New York?
15. What is Madame Ovide's advice to Lucille as she sends her to work for Mamzelle Hurston? Is Lucille good at doing what Madame Ovide tells her to do? How do you know?

Part Three: Lawout

16. What does Mamzelle mean when she says that Pince-Nez is not a friend to anyone "who doesn't go along to get along" (page 258)? What does she mean by "go along" and "get along"? How does Mamzelle react to what Lucille tells her she saw and heard Pince-Nez say, and how does Mamzelle seem to feel about him in general? Why?
17. There are many Haitian proverbs throughout this book. What is a proverb? Why do people say them out loud to each other? Is it easy or hard to understand what a person means when they recite a proverb? In the poem called "Proverbs" (pages 262–264), we see a whole list of them. Who is collecting them, and why? Look closely at number 10 and consider: Is it an accident that Mamzelle asks Lucille to tell her the meaning of this one in particular? Does it connect to the story or to any of the characters? How? Why is it "the best one for [Mamzelle] to remember," according to Lucille?
18. What does Mamzelle's story about her mother's death make Lucille think about? Why does she think about this? Do you think Mamzelle and Lucille have grown closer since Lucille began working for her? What is your evidence?
19. What advice does Mamzelle give as she helps Lucille get through her first period? Has Lucille heard anything like this before? Why or why not?
20. In the poem titled "A Pilgrimage" (pages 310–315), how does the visit from Cousin Phebus go? What is similar to her other visits, and what is different? What is important about the timing of this visit?
21. What do Haitians celebrate on the first two days of the year? How does Lucille celebrate with Mamzelle?
22. When Mamzelle and Lucille are in Cazales, what do they and we learn about the people who live there? How, when, and why did this group of people come to Haiti? What is their life like now, and what evidence do you have to support your answer?



23. What is the story of the Black Madonna, and how might she be an important figure for Lucille?
24. What does Lucille feel guilty about when she hears that Fifina was in Cazales?
25. Why is Lucille surprised to hear Mamzelle refer to “our ancestors” (page 356) when discussing the Iwa of vengeance? Is Lucille comfortable or uncomfortable with Mamzelle’s way of talking about Haitian traditions? What advice does Mamzelle give Lucille for thinking about her feelings on this topic, and do you agree with her? Does Lucille?
26. As Lucille and Mamzelle discuss Haitian history in the poem “What They Did Not Teach Us” (pages 360–362) and the following poem, what specific history lessons does Lucille dream of teaching at her and Fifina’s school? Why does she want to teach those lessons?
27. “Now I see that history is another way of finding shapes in wood” (page 366). What are all the layers of meaning in this statement? How and why does Lucille connect carving and history? What role does she imagine for herself, and how does that role connect to the jobs and relationships she has experienced as well as to her dreams?
28. What is so special about the “Cave of the Lost” in which Lucille and Oreste find themselves after the protest gets broken up? What and who is and has been inside this cave? Is it a fitting setting for this reunion of Lucille and Oreste? How so?
29. Why does Lucille decide not to flee with Oreste? Would you have done the same? Why or why not?
30. What accusations does Lucille make at Mamzelle, directly or indirectly, in the note she writes to her (pages 401–402)? Do you think the two women will ever speak to each other again if the note is delivered?
31. In the poem titled “Wait” (pages 411–413), what does Mamzelle promise Lucille? Is this a realistic promise? Has Lucille seen evidence of how books or words can hurt people? How would you describe Lucille and Mamzelle’s relationship at this point in the story?
32. What are all the meanings of the final words of *When the Mapou Sings*, and what feelings do they infuse the novel with? Is this a happy ending? What makes you say yes, or what makes you say no?

These questions were prepared by Sarah Banks, a high school English teacher in the Bronx, New York, with a PhD in comparative literature from the University of California, Berkeley.