

“The kind of book we need to set literary expectations for a new decade...so wonderfully terrifying, intimate, and magical.”

—Kiese Laymon, author of *Heavy: An American Memoir*

*every
bone
a
prayer*




a novel

ASHLEY BLOOMS

Reading Group Guide

1. Misty's idea of inner names includes memories and sounds, things remembered and lost. What does that mean to you? Can you think of anything that would be a part of your name?
2. Compare Misty's and William's home lives. How are they each coping with the challenges of their families? Do they understand each other?
3. Misty thinks her family only notices her when she's sad or hurt. Have you ever felt like that? What did you do?
4. Why do you think Misty decides to tell her mother about Penny kissing the green glass man? Was there another choice she could have made?
5. Do you think that corporal punishment is ever justified for children? Besides the physical pain, what does Misty notice and remember about being whipped with the switch?
6. How does the environment interact with Misty's emotions? Would that relationship still exist without her empathy? How might it be different?

7. Throughout the book, Misty and Penny reach out to each other but always seem to miss. What prevents them from supporting or helping one another?
8. Misty encounters several dangers when she takes off her skin. What are they, and how does she eventually overcome them?
9. Caroline explains that she thought she could punish Earl *and* move on, but she might only get one of those things. What kind of justice do you think she gets in the end? Is it what she deserved?

A Conversation with the Author

How did your experiences as a Kentuckian shape the setting of the book? What do you think people overlook when they think about Appalachia?

I think Appalachia has often been a useful tool and talking point for those in power, which is something Elizabeth Catte talks about far more eloquently than I can in her book *What You're Getting Wrong about Appalachia*. It's a book I recommend every time someone asks me a question like this. And I think Appalachia still exists as a monolith to many people, which often means they overlook things like the sheer existence of and therefore the contributions of black people and other people of color in Appalachia (take the Affrilachian poets, for example), or the long history of social, economic, and labor activism, or rural queerness, or the fact that Appalachia is an incredibly large place that includes cities and various religions and far more complexity and nuance than it's often depicted with (check out Roger May's photography series *Looking at Appalachia* to get an idea of the scope of the region). I know all these things to be true about my home. And when I write about it, I try to hold as much as I can in my work, and to write with honesty and conviction and with magic, too.

What draws you to fantastical storytelling? How do you think

elements like Misty's empathic abilities and the statues in the garden contribute to the story you're telling overall?

Part of this answer is simple: I've always been drawn toward the fantastical and frightening. Even from the early stages of writing this book, I knew that *Every Bone a Prayer* would have a kind of magic system and that this system would be fundamental to the way the world worked. That's just part of who I am as a writer. But the other part of this answer is more complicated. Like a lot of my work, this book deals with trauma and its impact on people and families and its impact on how our identity gets made and remade. I'm influenced by my own experiences as a survivor, as someone who grew up in a violent home, as someone with PTSD. Trauma, and our responses to it, can be incredibly surreal. Flashbacks can thrust you back in time. Dissociation can numb your body, fog your thinking, make it feel as though you're watching your life like a movie on a screen. Memory loss is common, which means whole parts of your life can be lost. So when I try to capture or re-create the experience of trauma on the page, the tools of the fantastical, the strange, the surreal, become some of my best options. Those tools help me get closer to the lived, embodied experience of trauma, the way that it *feels* to be going through such big, frightening, often sudden disruptions. So there's this strange way that creating a realistic portrayal means using the most unrealistic elements.

One of Misty's biggest obstacles is the sense of being alone around other people, unable to connect with them. Why did you choose to focus on this?

Misty's loneliness emerged fairly quickly when I started writing. A lot of the conditions of her life naturally led there—she lives in a

very rural, very mountainous, very small town without access to a lot of distractions; she's growing up in a place and within a religion that often encourage silence when it comes to violence or abuse; she has an ability that she fears sharing with others because she's not sure how they'll react. There are a lot of things that Misty is holding back. And in regards to her ability, there's also a whole part of her life that is so much bigger and brighter that she wants to share but feels unable to. She wants, like most of us, to be known, understood, and loved for who she is. But when the abuse begins, all of these circumstances become even heavier. Misty's confusion and shame and fear grow and she feels even more alone. If she's going to find healing, she has to reach out and find that connection, but with every event, every page in the book, reaching out feels further and further away. The cure and the poison are tied, as they so often are.

You deal extensively with the power of names throughout the book. Tell us how you feel about names, and your own name.

When I started publishing, I decided that I wanted to write under a pen name. Not in an attempt to obscure my true identity, but actually to get closer to it. When I married, I didn't take my partner's last name, and I knew I didn't want to publish under my birth name, either. They were both just different men's names. Neither really felt representative of me or my work. *Blooms* was an easy choice because it was a nickname given to me by my grandmother. The story goes that I, like many children, hated wearing clothing and would strip naked as soon as we got home from anywhere. Granny teased my mother about it one day, asking, "Why don't you ever buy that youngin' any bloomers?" *Bloomers* got shortened to *Blooms* and it stuck. So not only did using *Blooms* as a pen name link me to

a kind of matriarchal lineage, but it also linked me to a time in my life where I was unafraid of my body. Where I could happily move through the world in the most vulnerable way. For me, one of the most difficult parts of recovering from sexual violence was trying to heal my relationship with my body. Taking the name *Blooms* is part of that healing. It links me not only to the women in my family who helped make me who I am, but also to myself—a name that is proof that I didn't always fear or distrust my body. That I embraced it once, wholeheartedly. *Blooms* is proof that I can do that again. Every day that I choose compassion over shame, love over judgment, I am actually returning to myself, to that little girl I was. *Blooms* gives me hope. That's the power of names.

Beth and her sisters are an interesting team, as are Misty and Penny. How did you go about exploring the sibling relationship? Do you have siblings?

The relationships in this book were definitely one of the most joyous parts of writing for me. Beth, Jem, and Dolly were especially fun to work with. When I started a scene with them, the dialogue felt like it was springing onto the page—I could hear them all so clearly in my mind. I drew on my own experiences with my siblings (an older brother and sister) and from watching my parents' relationships with their siblings. I spent a lot of time with my extended family as a child, so I was often surrounded by aunts, uncles, and cousins. And there was always banter and teasing and joking with care and tenderness sandwiched somewhere between. And as a book, *Every Bone a Prayer* is really concerned with relationships, identity, and connection. Misty's ability (or inability) to feel close to the people she loves is one of the driving forces, so capturing these sibling relationships

felt like a vital part of the narrative. And I am always striving toward nuance and complexity. Sibling relationships are wonderful, but they're also really annoying. Sharing such proximity, vying for the same attention and resources, reaching different stages of life and development at different times. Growing up together can be tense, full of falling out and hating each other, then being best friends ten minutes later. I wanted all of those things to be present here.

The moment when Misty examines her body and recalls the ways she has lived in it has an aching sort of tenderness. Do you think our bodies are always our homes, or is that a choice we have to make?

I want the answer to this question to be yes. I want to believe that our bodies are always our homes even if we don't always feel that way. But I also know that our bodies are not separate from the world and our relationship to them is not defined solely by us or our feelings. That was one of the driving questions of the book: How do you reconcile with the parts of yourself, your body, your experience that you did not actively choose? What do you do with those pieces? Can you love them? Can you accept them? Can you erase them? I don't have an easy answer, especially not for everyone. I can only answer for me in saying that every day I am trying to come home to myself, every day I am trying to give myself the love and care that others often denied me. I am trying to be better to myself and my body than the world has been. And through that, hopefully, find a kind of peace and understanding, a new relationship with my body.

Where do you start a story? Do you know the ending when you begin?

I often have *an* ending in mind when I begin work, even if that

ending changes. Knowing where I'm going puts guardrails around the story and keeps me focused, helps me sort through the imagery, symbols, relationships, etc. Novels, especially, have a tendency to sprawl. There's just so much that you *could* do that I find it helps to put at least a few limitations on myself. And the initial inspiration for my work often comes in many forms—a snippet of dialogue between two people in a moment of tension, an image of a character when their guard drops and they are alone and their face tells me something they've never said before, a flash of setting that invites me inside. It's often something small. A bright, fleeting spark without context, usually without even a hint of plot, but there's always promise. And the promise is enough to get started.

How do you strike a balance between the topics that are heavy and the ones that are beautiful?

This is something I think about a lot because I want my work to feel authentic, and in order for that to happen, I believe there has to be a mix of good and bad. No matter how dark or dire things seem, there's also hope, laughter, community, family, love. The fact that these things happen alongside one another doesn't negate them, but it does complicate things. So I try to be mindful about including those moments of reprieve, like in Misty's relationship with her cousins or when she gets to go see the fireworks in town. Even something as seemingly small as the moment when Misty eats cornbread and milk near the end of the book. I don't think the comfort and kindness of those small moments should be neglected. Especially when it can feel like we (as Americans) favor narratives of pain and suffering, especially the pain and suffering of certain people. The only value in a story doesn't come from how harrowing or raw it is, just like the

value in a life doesn't come only from what a person has survived. I think there can be something unfair and maybe even dangerous about focusing too much attention on pain. It flattens life in a way that doesn't seem real. It's messier than just moments of hurt. Messier because those moments often exist in tandem with great hope and fear and courage. I try my best to value each part of a life, of a story, and to give my attention to the whole complicated mess.