

Silver Sparrow by Tayari Jones

Week: 1 of 4

Chapters/Pages: 3-15

Themes: Family secrets | Parent/child relationships

Opening: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.” -Muriel Rukeyser

- What meaning does this quote have for you? Why might the world split open if a woman “told the truth about her life”? What kinds of truths have you observed or heard about in the lives of women around you? In your own life?
- What kinds of things get in the way of women telling the truth about their lives? What can we as women do to help one another share the truths we want to share?

Before Reading:

- Tayari Jones is an African American writer born and raised in Atlanta. She is best known for her novel *Leaving Atlanta*, which is set during the city’s infamous child murders of 1979-81 (The author was in the fifth grade when thirty school children in Atlanta were murdered in the neighborhoods near her home and school). Jones now lives in the Northeast, writing novels and teaching Creative Writing at a university.
- *Silver Sparrow* (published in 2011) tells the story of two teenage girls born to the same father—a man who is married to both of their mothers. One of the girls, Dana, knows about her father’s other family, and the other girl, Chaurisse does not.
- Ask the group what they think of when they hear the word “bigamy.” Depending on the group, it may be necessary for the BGL to define the word (also known as “polygamy” and “plural marriage”: the practice of marrying one person when one is already legally married to someone else).
- Based on the title and cover, what do you think this book will be like? Does it seem like the kind of book you might be interested in? Why/why not?

Reading Passages and Questions:

Read the poem at the beginning of the book, “A Daughter is a Colony” by Natasha Trethewey

***Depending on the literacy level of the group’s members, the BGL may decide to read this poem aloud, rather than asking for a volunteer or going around the circle. If necessary, explain that Athena was a Greek goddess who was born fully formed out of her father Zeus’ forehead.*

- What meaning does this poem have for you? What lines or images stand out for you, if any?
- In your opinion, what does this poem have to say about what it means to be a daughter? What might it say about being the daughter of a *father*, in particular?
- What does the title of the poem mean to you? What comes to mind when you hear the word “colony”? How do you react to the idea of a daughter being a colony?
- What does being a daughter mean to *you*? How would you describe your experience of being a daughter—both to your mother, and to your father? In what ways (if any) is being a mother’s daughter different from being a father’s daughter?
- Why do you think the author decided to start her book with this poem? What possible clues does it give us about what the book may be about?

Read Chapter 1, pp. 3-5

***Again, depending on the group, the BGL may decide to read pp. 3-5 aloud to participants, and start with group reading on the top of pg. 6.*

- Based on what we’ve read so far, how does Dana (the character narrating this part of the book) seem to feel about her father having another family? How does it affect her?
- Dana states on pg. 4 that to call her mother James’ “wife” “doesn’t really explain the full complexity of her position.” What do you imagine it would be like to be the wife of a man who was married to

Silver Sparrow by Tayari Jones

someone else first? What kinds of challenges might she face? Why might a woman agree to this kind of arrangement?

- Dana refers to the words used to describe a child like herself—one born outside of a legal marriage. Why do you think these words are so difficult for Dana and her mother to say out loud? What is your own reaction to words like “illegitimate” and “bastard”? What gives words like these power? How has Dana’s belief that she is an “illegitimate” daughter affected her, in your opinion? How might words and labels like these affect the way a child thinks about herself?
- This passage refers to the fact that Dana and her mother sometimes spy on Laverne and Chaurisse, James’ other wife and daughter. What is your reaction to this? What might motivate them to do this?
- Dana insists that her mother “didn’t ruin her childhood or anyone’s marriage.” What is your reaction to this? What judgments do you have about Dana’s mother, if any? In what ways (if any) can you relate to or sympathize with her position?
- Dana feels that she and her mother have an advantage over Chaurisse and Laverne, because they know about James’ bigamy, and Chaurisse and Laverne do not. How do you react to this? Who, if anyone, has the upper hand in this situation?
- Point out the line: “Life, you see, is all about knowing things.” What do you think about this statement? When, if ever, is it better not to know the whole truth? What are the benefits of knowing? What are the benefits of not knowing?

Read Chapter 1, pp. 6-10

- Based on this passage, how would you describe Dana’s relationship with her father? How would you describe the relationship between James and Dana’s mother?
- How do you feel about the way James responds to Dana’s drawing? How do you think this affects Dana? Dana’s mother?
- Point out the lines on pg. 8: “What goes on in this house between your mother and me is grown people’s business...What we do in this house has to be a secret.” What is your reaction to this? Do you feel James and Dana’s mother have the right to ask Dana to keep what happens in the house a secret? Why/why not? What impact might keeping this secret have on Dana?
- James tells Dana that “she is the secret.” How do you feel about this? How might knowing she’s a secret in her father’s eyes affect Dana?
- What is your impression of James so far? What kind of man do you think he is? Do you have sympathy for him in this situation? Why/why not?

Read Chapter 1, pp. 10-15

- How would you describe Dana’s relationship with her mother? What do you notice about the way they interact with one another? How is Dana’s relationship with her mother different than her relationship with James?
- What seems to be going on with Dana in this passage? What is motivating her to cover up the gap in her teeth? Why do you think she reacts the way she does when her mother says Chaurisse’s name?
- What do you think of Dana’s mother taking her to spy on Chaurisse? What might her mother hope to accomplish by doing this? What impact does seeing Chaurisse seem to have on Dana?
- Dana’s mother compares Dana to Chaurisse, saying that Dana is smarter and prettier than her sister. What is your reaction to this? What do you think her motivation is in making these comparisons?
- The chapter ends with Dana’s mother saying that she and Dana have the whole world in their hands. How do you react to this? What do Dana and her mother have that Chaurisse and Laverne don’t have? What, if anything, do you think is missing in their lives?
- Based on what we’ve read so far, what do you think this book will be like? What do you predict will happen with the characters?

Poetry (Optional): “New Honesty” by Jessie Childress (from *Things I Have to Tell You*)

Silver Sparrow by Tayari Jones

- What is your response to this poem? What do you notice about it? What lines stand out for you, if any?
- Why does the poet capitalize “Truth”? How does she compare it to truth with a lowercase ‘t’? Do you think there is more than one kind of truth? Why/why not?
- What do you think is the meaning of the title: “New Honesty”? What do you think is the old or other honesty the poet might have been thinking of when writing this title?
- What’s your reaction to the first line (“Can I find a balance between me and the box I call my family?”)? Why do you think the poet refers to her family as a “box”? How do you think the poet would answer the question posed in this line? How would you answer this question?
- What is the poet talking about in the lines that begin, “I suppose it would be scary”? Why does she call these things scary? Why might she choose to keep this Truth to herself?
- The poet mentions tossing between “myself and the various identities I have been assigned.” What do you think these identities might be? Who assigned them to the poet? How do you manage the various identities you have?

Poetry Prompt: “If I told you...”

In the book, Dana is told that the identity of her father is a secret she must keep—and that she herself is a secret. Think about something in your own life that you feel you can’t share with anyone else. Write about what would happen if you told someone that secret. How do you think that person would respond? What would it feel like for you? How would your life be different if this secret were out in the open? **You do not have to say what the secret is.** Just write a poem about what it would feel like if you told.

Closing: “Walk tall, walk well, walk safe, walk free/And my harm never come to thee/Walk wise, walk good, walk proud, walk true/And may the sun always shine on you/Walk power, walk hope, walk faith, walk light/And may peace always guide you right/Walk joy, walk brave, walk love, walk strong/And may life always give you song.” — South African Blessing

Next week: pick up on pg. 88